SXSW 2025

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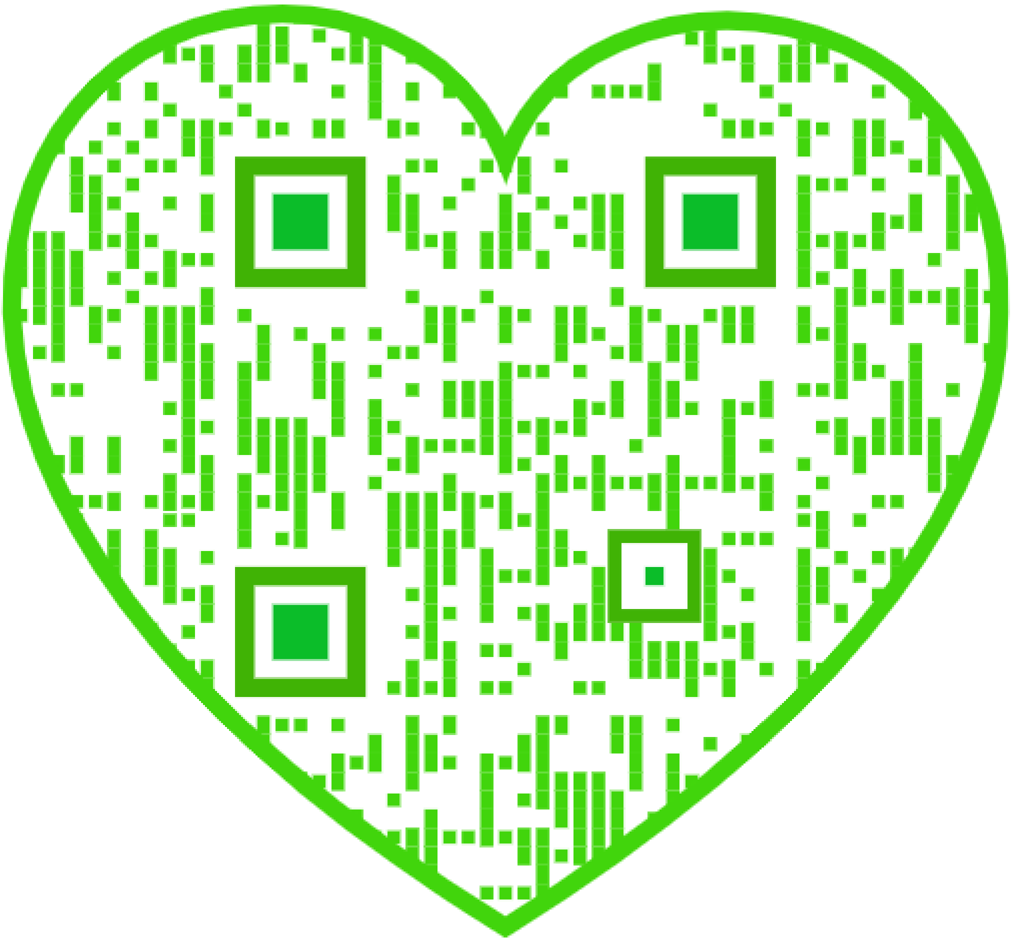
COSMIC
AUSTIN TX

BRANDING
POWER
PLAYERS

KOE WETZEL

THE RABBLE-ROUSING
RACONTEUR WRITING
HIS WAY TO THE TOP

PLUS >> GRUPO FRONTERA // JOHN SUMMIT



SXSW 2025

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BRANDING
POWER
PLAYERS

GRUPO FRONTERA

REGIONAL MEXICAN STARS, GLOBAL AMBITIONS

PLUS >> JOHN SUMMIT // KOE WETZEL

SXSW 2025

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BRANDING POWER PLAYERS

JOHN SUMMIT

TAKES DANCE MUSIC TO NEW PEAKS

PLUS >> GRUPO FRONTERA // KOE WETZEL

300+ARTISTS

Ask Congress to Pass

AMERICAN MUSIC FAIRNESS ACT

Historic legislation would close 100–year old loophole and require AM/ FM radio to pay artists.

ABBA
Aerosmith
Alanis Morissette
Barbra Streisand
Barry Manilow
Becky G
Billy Idol
Billy Porter
Blondie
Bonnie Raitt
Boyz II Men
Carly Simon
Carole King
Celine Dion
Common
Cyndi Lauper
Darryl McDaniels (Run DMC)
David Byrne
David Foster
Def Leppard
Dionne Warwick
Duran Duran
Elvis Costello
Gavin Rossdale (Bush)
Gene Simmons (KISS)
George Strait
Gloria Estefan
Graham Nash
Hootie & The Blowfish
James Taylor
Jason Aldean
Jelly Roll
Jewel
Joan Jett
JoJo Siwa
Josh Groban
Kate Hudson
LeAnn Rimes
Lin-Manuel Miranda
Mariah Carey
Marshmello
Matchbox Twenty
MC Lyte
Melissa Etheridge
Melle Mel
Miranda Lambert
New Kids on the Block
Ozzy Osbourne
P!nk
Paul Stanley (KISS)
Peter Frampton
R.E.M.
Randy Travis
Reba
Sara Bareilles
Sheryl Crow
Smokey Robinson
Steve Miller
Stevie Nicks
The Go-Go's
The Lumineers
TLC
Train
Weezer

AND MORE

musicfairnessaction.org

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VOLUME 137
NO. 4

ON THE COVERS
Koe Wetzel photographed by Eric Ryan Anderson on Jan. 22 in Pittsburg, Texas.

From left: Beto Acosta, Brian Ortega, Adelaido “Payo” Solís, Julian Peña Jr., Carlos Guerrero and Juan Javier Cantú of Grupo Frontera photographed by Jasmine Archie on Dec. 20, 2024, in McAllen, Texas.

John Summit photographed by Ysa Pérez on Feb. 4 at Riverset Studios in Miami.

TO OUR READERS
Billboard will publish its next issue on March 22. For 24/7 music coverage, go to billboard.com.

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WELCOME TO KOE COUNTRY
Deep in the heart of Texas with **Koe Wetzel**, the (slightly reformed) rabble-rouser whose raw, rock-infused twang is climbing the charts.

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Having gone from playing quinceañeras to arenas, **Grupo Frontera** is ready to take its brand of *música mexicana* global — and rep Texas’ Rio Grande Valley all the way.

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DISCOVERY

Warner Bros. Discovery
wishes to thank the
Grubman Shire Meiselas & Sacks
team for its counsel
in the negotiation and
formation of our music
rights joint venture with
Cutting Edge Group.

GRUBMAN
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MEISELAS &
SACKS
ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIA LAWYERS

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MASTHEAD

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SHAB

> *“A compelling collection of songs... that flow seamlessly between upbeat anthems and introspective moments.”*
>
> *— Rolling Stone (U.K.)*

SHAB
Departures
Time Origin Remarks
17:25 TEHRAN JUST IN TIME
17:35 FRANKFURT THANK GOD
17:50 NEW YORK COMING TO AMERICA
18:00 BALTIMORE-WASHINGTON MAKING A NEW HOME
17:30 MIAMI --
17:40 DALLAS-FORT WORTH LIFE CHANGED
17:45 CHICAGO SHORT LAYOVER
18:05 BALTIMORE-WASHINGTON --
18:20 DALLAS-FORT WORTH NEW LIFE
18:25 LOS ANGELES GETTING STARTED
18:35 MUNICH FIRST TOUR
19:00 DUBLIN FIRST ARENA TOUR
19:10 LONDON MAKING A NEW HOME
19:15 DALLAS ENJOY LIFE
SHAB
one suitcase

SHE FLED FUNDAMENTALISM
AND CAME **ALONE** TO AMERICA
SPEAKING **NO ENGLISH**
EVERYTHING THAT SHE OWNED IN

ONE SUITCASE

THE EXTRAORDINARY DOUBLE ALBUM FROM SHAB

AMERICAN EXPRESS

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SHIZ SUZUKI
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CONGRATS TO OUR TWO HITMAKERS

Bess Spaeth and **Shiz Suzuki** have set the bar for how we harness the power of music to forge meaningful connections with our customers.

We're thrilled to see them recognized on **Billboard's 2025 Branding Power Players list** for their impact in music-driven brand experiences and partnerships.

AM EX

DON'T *live life* WITHOUT IT℠

DATA FOR WEEK OF 3.08.2025

Tate McRae Tops The Billboard 200 With *So Close To What*

CHARLIE DENIS

BILLBOARD 200

1

So Close to What
Tate McRae

LAST WEEK	PEAK POSITION	WEEKS ON CHART
-	1	1

TATE McRAE SCORES her first No. 1 on the Billboard 200 as her third full-length studio set, *So Close to What*, debuts atop the list with 177,000 equivalent album units earned in the United States in the week ending Feb. 27, according to Luminate. It's the biggest debut week for a studio album by a woman in five months, when Sabrina Carpenter's *Short n' Sweet* opened at No. 1 with 362,000 on the Sept. 7, 2024-dated chart.

Of McRae's first-week equivalent album units, streaming-equivalent album units make up 105,000 (equaling 137.3 million on-demand official streams of the set's songs — the artist's biggest streaming week; it debuts at No. 2 on Top Streaming Albums), album sales account for 71,000 (likewise her best sales week as it starts at No. 1 on Top Album Sales) and track-equivalent album units total 1,000. The set's first-week sales were bolstered by its availability across four download variants (three widely available and one exclusive to McRae's web store), three CD variants (including one signed edition), seven vinyl variants (including two signed editions) and a cassette.

On the Billboard Hot 100, the Calgary, Alberta, native charts 11 songs from the album, including two in the top 25: "Sports Car" drives 57-16 for a new high and "Revolving Door" opens at No. 22.

McRae — the first Canadian woman to top the Billboard 200 since Céline Dion in 2019 — ushered in the album's release with an appearance on NBC's *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. She will hit the road for the Miss Possessive Tour starting March 18 in Mexico City. **—KEITH CAULFIELD**

Hot 100

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title PRODUCER (SONGWRITER)	Artist IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
②	①	1	**#1 for 2 WEEKS** **Luther** SOUNWAVE,J.M.ANTONOFF,ROSELILAH,M-TECH,SCOTT BRIDGEWAY,K.WASHINGTON (K.L.DUCKWORTH,S.I.ROWE,A.BOGGS,S.J.DEW,M.A.SPEARS,J.M.ANTONOFF,R.L.BACHA,M.BERNARD,K.WASHINGTON,R.M.AKERS JR)	**Kendrick Lamar & SZA** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	1	14
4	3	2	**Die With A Smile** BRUNO MARS,D'MILE,LADY GAGA,ANDREW WATT (BRUNO MARS,S.G.GERMANOTTA,D.EMILE II,J.E.FAUNTLEROY II,A.WOTMAN)	**Lady Gaga & Bruno Mars** STREAMLINE/INTERSCOPE/ATLANTIC/ICLG	1	28
①	2	3	**Not Like Us** MUSTARD,S.MOMBERGER (K.L.DUCKWORTH)	**Kendrick Lamar** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	1	42
③	4	4	**TV Off** MUSTARD,S.MOMBERGER,SOUNWAVE,J.M.ANTONOFF,K.WASHINGTON (K.L.DUCKWORTH,D.I.MCFARLANE,S.A.MOMBERGER,M.A.SPEARS,J.M.ANTONOFF,K.WASHINGTON)	**Kendrick Lamar Featuring Lefty Gunplay** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	2	14
8	9	5	**A Bar Song (Tipsy)** S.COOK,N.SASTRY (C.O.CHIBUEZE,S.C.COOK,N.SASTRY,J.JONES,J.A.KENT,M.A.WILLIAMS)	**Shaboozey** AMERICAN DOGWOOD/EMPIRE/MAGNOLIA MUSIC	1	46
⑦	7	6	**APT.** BRUNO MARS,CIRKUT,O.FEDI,R.CHAHAYED (R.PARK,A.R.ALLEN,C.B.BROWN,R.CHAHAYED,O.FEDI,P.M.LAWRENCE II,BRUNO MARS,T.M.THOMAS,H.R.WALTER,M.D.CHAPMAN,N.CHINN)	**ROSE & Bruno Mars** THE BLACK LABEL/ATLANTIC	3	19
6	8	7	**Birds Of A Feather** FINNEAS (B.E.O'CONNELL,F.B.O'CONNELL)	**Billie Eilish** DARKROOM/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	2	41
⑨	11	⑧	**Pink Pony Club** D.NIGRO (D.L.NIGRO,K.R.AMSTUTZ)	**Chappell Roan** KRA/AMUSEMENT/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	8	37
12	12	9	**Lose Control** INFAMOUS,AMMO,J.BUNETTA (J.E.COLEMAN,J.C.BUNETTA,M.RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ,MIKKY EKKO,J.C.DIMSDALE)	**Teddy Swims** SWIMS INT./WARNER	1	80
⑤	5	10	**Squabble Up** KENDRICK LAMAR,SOUNWAVE,SCOTT BRIDGEWAY,J.M.ANTONOFF (K.L.DUCKWORTH,M.A.SPEARS,R.M.AKERS JR,J.M.ANTONOFF)	**Kendrick Lamar** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	1	14
-	⑩	11	**Nokia** ELKAN (A.GRAHAM)	**Drake** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC/SANTA ANNA	10	2
11	13	12	**Beautiful Things** E.BLAIR (B.BOONE,E.BLAIR,J.L.LARSEN)	**Benson Boone** NIGHT STREET/WARNER	2	57
⑮	⑯	⑬	**That's So True** G.ABRAMS,A.DESSNER,J.BUNETTA (G.ABRAMS,A.HOBERT)	**Gracie Abrams** INTERSCOPE/ICLG	6	19
17	19	⑭	**Love Somebody** J.MOI,CHARLIE HANDSOME (M.C.WALLEN,J.BYRON,A.G.GORLEY,J.K.HINDLIN,E.LOELV,CHARLIE HANDSOME,N.J.GALE,M.SORBARA,S.C.FRANK,S.F.R.MASTROIANNI,Y.GRUZMAN)	**Morgan Wallen** MERCURY/BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	1	19
⑩	14	15	**30 For 30** J WHITE DID IT,M.UZOWURU (S.I.ROWE,K.L.DUCKWORTH,J WHITE DID IT,M.UZOWURU,G.WILLIAMS,R.DEBARGE)	**SZA With Kendrick Lamar** TOP DAWG/RCA	10	10
41	57	⑯	**SAL** **Sports Car** R.B.TEDDER,G.BOUTIN (T.MCRAE,R.B.TEDDER,G.J.BOUTIN,JULIA MICHAELS)	**Tate McRae** RCA	16	5
20	20	17	**I Had Some Help** L.BELL,CHARLIE HANDSOME,HOSKINS (A.R.POST,M.C.WALLEN,L.B.BELL,CHARLIE HANDSOME,E.K.SMITH,J.J.HOSKINS,C.P.WALTERS,A.G.GORLEY)	**Post Malone Featuring Morgan Wallen** MERCURY/BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	1	42
18	17	18	**Espresso** J.BUNETTA (S.A.CARPENTER,J.C.BUNETTA,A.R.ALLEN,S.N.JONES)	**Sabrina Carpenter** ISLAND/REPUBLIC	3	46
19	23	⑲	**I'm The Problem** J.MOI,CHARLIE HANDSOME (M.C.WALLEN,G.W.BLOCK,J.MCLAUGHLIN,E.K.SMITH,CHARLIE HANDSOME)	**Morgan Wallen** MERCURY/BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	2	4
16	24	⑳	**Timeless** P.L.WILLIAMS,OJIVOLTA,M.G.DEAN,TWISCO (A.M.TESFAYE,J.T.CARTER,P.L.WILLIAMS,M.WILLIAMS,R.I.CUBINA,T.SHARRIEFF,K.HOOD,D.P.CHISOLM,BLESSED,J.MORGAN,M.G.DEAN)	**The Weeknd & Playboi Carti** XO/REPUBLIC	3	22

Go to the Chart Beat section of billboard.com for complete charts coverage.

The 36-year-old Jacksonville, Ala., native's sixth Hot 100 entry also rises to No. 11 on Hot Country Songs.

MATT SIMMONS OBO GILDAN

HOT 100

59

"Worst Way"
Riley Green

You're the only songwriter on "Worst Way." How was it created?
I always try to push myself to go outside of my comfort level, especially when I'm by myself. I don't write a lot of love songs. One of the tough things about writing a song by yourself — especially a song that's that forward, for lack of a better term — is you don't have anybody to bounce that off of. I think the [reaction] that really sold me was I played an acoustic version, put it on my Instagram and it took off. I always like to use the fans to gauge their temperature on a song and see if it's a hit. That song raised its hand pretty quickly and became a favorite.

Why was it important to you to bring the heat while still adding a little humor in the music video?
My inspiration was one of my favorite movies, *Bull Durham*. I had a huge crush on Susan Sarandon as a kid because it was an intimate, sexy movie. There was that comedic relief of [Kevin Costner's character] wearing her bathrobe and eating cereal and throwing the cereal bowl and spilling the milk. I wanted to use that as a way to make it a little bit more me, but also take a bit of the edge off. I think we really nailed it. If we did anything right, it was adding that comedic relief in the video.

You reached No. 1 on Country Airplay with "You Look Like You Love Me" with Ella Langley in December. What's the process of following that up?
"You Look Like You Love Me" is a very different type of song, but it's still a love song and it still has a little tongue-in-cheek humor about it. It's always nice to have a hit. They're not easy to come by. I think the best albums I've put out have a lot of different types of songs on them. What I always try to do is be successful in as many avenues as I can. That's what's so great about having a song like "You Look Like You Love Me" hit the top of the charts and then have a song like "Worst Way" that's hot on its heels.

—MELINDA NEWMAN

HOT 100 FIRST-TIMERS

Artists who have recently made their initial appearances on the chart

ARTIST	SONG	DEBUT POSITION	DEBUT DATE
Justice	"Wake Me Up" with The Weeknd	45	Feb. 15
Pimmie	"Pimmie's Dilemma" with PartyNextDoor and Drake	45	March 1

AIRPLAY, SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD HOT 100: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR CURRENT SONGS ACROSS ALL GENRES, RANKED BY STREAMING ACTIVITY DATA BY ONLINE MUSIC SOURCES TRACKED BY LUMINATE, RADIO AIRPLAY AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS AS MEASURED BY LUMINATE AND SALES DATA AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2025 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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BILLBOARD 200

36

Zach Top
Cold Beer & Country Music

Top notches his first Country Airplay top 10 — and the first for record label Leo33 — as "I Never Lie" rises 12-10. It's his second entry on the chart following the No. 15-peaking "Sounds Like the Radio" last year.

90

Bob Marley and The Wailers
Legend

In the week ending Feb. 27, the set surpassed 1 million vinyl copies sold since Luminate began tracking data in 1991. It has sold at least 1,000 copies every week since November 2022.

188

Killswitch Engage
This Consequence

On the Top Album Sales chart, the set launches at No. 8 with 7,000 sold, marking the fifth top 10-charting release for the rock band. On the Billboard 200, it's the act's seventh entry.

155

A Day To Remember
Big Ole Album, Vol. 1

A Day To Remember's *Big Ole Album, Vol. 1* debuts on the Billboard 200 at No. 155 — and as the only title on the list charting solely from physical album sales. The set was surprise-released Feb. 18 exclusively on CD and vinyl, with its download and streaming versions slated for a March 21 release.

In the tracking week ending Feb. 20, the album sold about 4,000 copies in the United States, according to Luminate, yielding debuts on Top Album Sales and Indie Store Album Sales. All sales generated Feb. 18-20 were from brick-and-mortar stores.

In the week ending Feb. 27, as mail-order sales kicked in, it sold nearly 10,000 copies, largely from vinyl sales (almost 8,000). The set surges 27-5 on Top Album Sales and 4-2 on Indie Store Album Sales and enters at No. 4 on Vinyl Albums and No. 6 on Top Hard Rock Albums.

—KEITH CAULFIELD

Billboard 200

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Artist IMPRINT/DISTRIBUTING LABEL	Title	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
HOT SHOT DEBUT		①	**#1 for 1 WEEK** **Tate McRae** RCA	**So Close To What**	1	1
-	①	2	**PARTYNEXTDOOR & Drake** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC/SANTA ANNA	**$ome $exy $ongs 4 U**	1	2
①	3	3	**Kendrick Lamar** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	**GNX**	1	14
②	4	4	**SZA** TOP DAWG/RCA	**SOS**	1	116
7	②	5	**Sabrina Carpenter** ISLAND/REPUBLIC	**Short n' Sweet**	1	27
4	5	6	**Bad Bunny** RIMAS	**Debi Tirar Mas Fotos**	1	8
3	6	7	**The Weeknd** XO/REPUBLIC	**Hurry Up Tomorrow**	1	4
⑤	7	8	**Chappell Roan** KRA/AMUSEMENT/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	**The Rise And Fall Of A Midwest Princess**	2	49
8	9	9	**Morgan Wallen** BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	**One Thing At A Time**	1	104
⑥	8	10	**Billie Eilish** DARKROOM/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	**Hit Me Hard And Soft**	2	41
13	11	11	**Gracie Abrams** INTERSCOPE/ICLG	**The Secret Of Us**	2	36
11	13	12	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	**The Tortured Poets Department**	1	45
15	15	13	**Noah Kahan** MERCURY/REPUBLIC	**Stick Season**	2	118
12	14	14	**Tyler, The Creator** COLUMBIA	**CHROMAKOPIA**	1	18
16	17	⑮	**Morgan Wallen** BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	**Dangerous: The Double Album**	1	216
24	22	⑯	**GG** **Post Malone** MERCURY/REPUBLIC	**The Diamond Collection**	11	66
⑨	10	17	**Kendrick Lamar** TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE/UME	**DAMN.**	1	411
⑩	12	18	**Kendrick Lamar** TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE/UME	**good kid, m.A.A.d city**	2	644
NEW		⑲	**Neton Vega** JOSA	**Mi Vida Mi Muerte**	19	1
20	20	⑳	**BigXthaPlug** BIGXTHAPLUG/UNITEDMASTERS	**Take Care**	8	20

SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD 200: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR ALBUMS, BASED ON MULTIMETRIC CONSUMPTION, BLENDING TRADITIONAL ALBUM SALES, STREAMING-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS AND TRACK-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS, AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2025 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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STREAMING SONGS

1

"Luther"
Kendrick Lamar & SZA

KENDRICK LAMAR AND SZA'S "LUTHER" leads the Billboard Hot 100 (see chart, page 10) for a second week. The single — its title is an ode to late R&B legend Luther Vandross, who is sampled on the track — became Lamar's sixth No. 1 and SZA's third.

"Luther" totaled 51 million radio airplay audience impressions (a new weekly best), 38.7 million official U.S. streams and 4,000 sold in the United States Feb. 21-27, according to Luminate. It tallies a second week at No. 1 on the Streaming Songs chart, rises 6-3 for a new high on Radio Songs and ranks at No. 12 (after reaching No. 4) on Digital Song Sales.

Meanwhile, reflecting its mass-appeal mix of rap and R&B, "Luther" becomes the first song to have ruled both the Adult R&B Airplay and Rap Airplay charts (which launched in 1993 and 1999, respectively). It jumps 6-1 on the former a week after it hit No. 1 on the latter. The song also lifts to No. 1 on the genre's overall R&B/Hip-Hop Airplay chart and the Mainstream R&B/Hip-Hop Airplay list. Plus, a week earlier, it crowned Rhythmic Airplay. It additionally holds in the top 15 on Mainstream Top 40 Airplay.

"Luther" samples Vandross and Cheryl Lynn's cover of Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell's "If This World Were Mine." The original hit No. 27 on Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs (then named Hot Rhythm & Blues Singles) in 1968; Vandross and Lynn's remake reached No. 4 on the chart (which was then called Hot Black Singles) in 1982.

Vandross, who died in 2005, has now appeared on Hot 100 leaders spanning 46 years (despite not having an official billing on "Luther"), beginning with Chic's 1978-79 six-week No. 1 disco classic, "Le Freak," on which he sang backup vocals.

—GARY TRUST AND TREVOR ANDERSON

Streaming Songs

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	Artist	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
②	①	1	#1 for 2 WEEKS **Luther** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	**Kendrick Lamar & SZA**	1	14
①	2	2	**Not Like Us** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	**Kendrick Lamar**	1	41
③	3	3	**TV Off** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	**Kendrick Lamar Featuring Lefty Gunplay**	2	14
5	⑤	4	**Die With A Smile** STREAMLINE/INTERSCOPE/ATLANTIC/ICLG	**Lady Gaga & Bruno Mars**	1	28
-	⑦	5	**Nokia** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC/SANTA ANNA	**Drake**	5	2
④	6	6	**Squabble Up** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	**Kendrick Lamar**	1	14
⑨	12	⑦	**Pink Pony Club** KRA/AMUSEMENT/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	**Chappell Roan**	7	23
RE-ENTRY		⑧	**Sports Car** RCA	**Tate McRae**	8	4
⑥	⑧	9	**All The Stars** TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE	**Kendrick Lamar & SZA**	5	16
NEW		⑩	**Revolving Door** RCA	**Tate McRae**	10	1
⑦	11	11	**30 For 30** TOP DAWG/RCA	**SZA With Kendrick Lamar**	7	10
10	19	⑫	**I'm The Problem** MERCURY/BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	**Morgan Wallen**	1	4
12	20	⑬	**APT.** THE BLACK LABEL/ATLANTIC	**ROSE & Bruno Mars**	2	19
⑪	16	14	**Birds Of A Feather** DARKROOM/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	**Billie Eilish**	2	41
16	23	⑮	**Lose Control** SWIMS INT./WARNER	**Teddy Swims**	3	65
18	28	⑯	**A Bar Song (Tipsy)** AMERICAN DOGWOOD/EMPIRE	**Shaboozey**	1	45
-	⑩	17	**Die Trying** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC/SANTA ANNA	**PARTYNEXTDOOR, Drake & Yebba**	10	2
15	26	⑱	**Beautiful Things** NIGHT STREET/WARNER	**Benson Boone**	1	57
21	38	⑲	**Love Somebody** MERCURY/BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	**Morgan Wallen**	1	17
22	36	⑳	**That's So True** INTERSCOPE/ICLG	**Gracie Abrams**	1	19

STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

STREAMING SONGS: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR STREAMED SONGS (AUDIO AND VIDEO) ON LEADING DIGITAL MUSIC SERVICES, AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2025 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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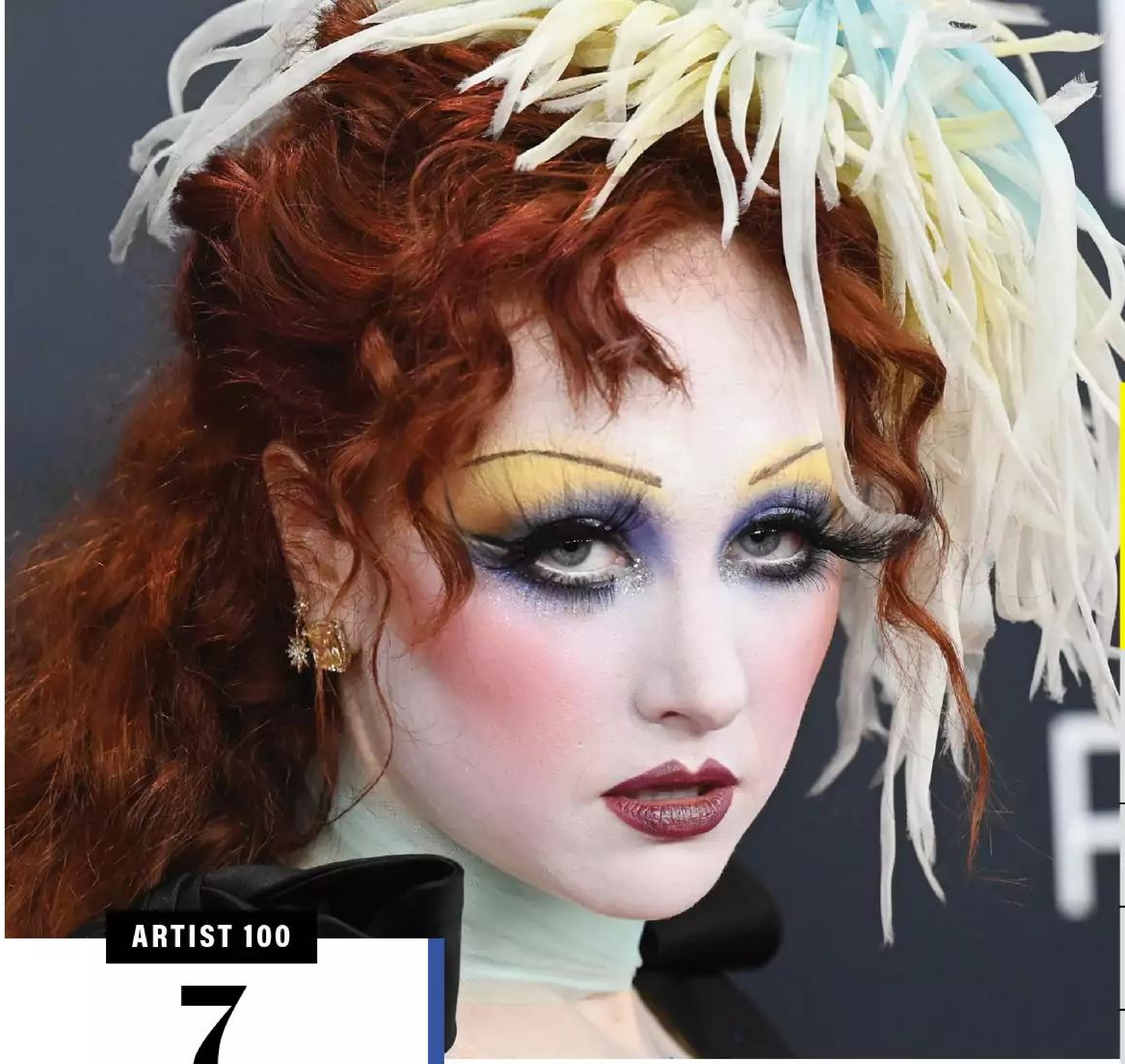


ARTIST 100

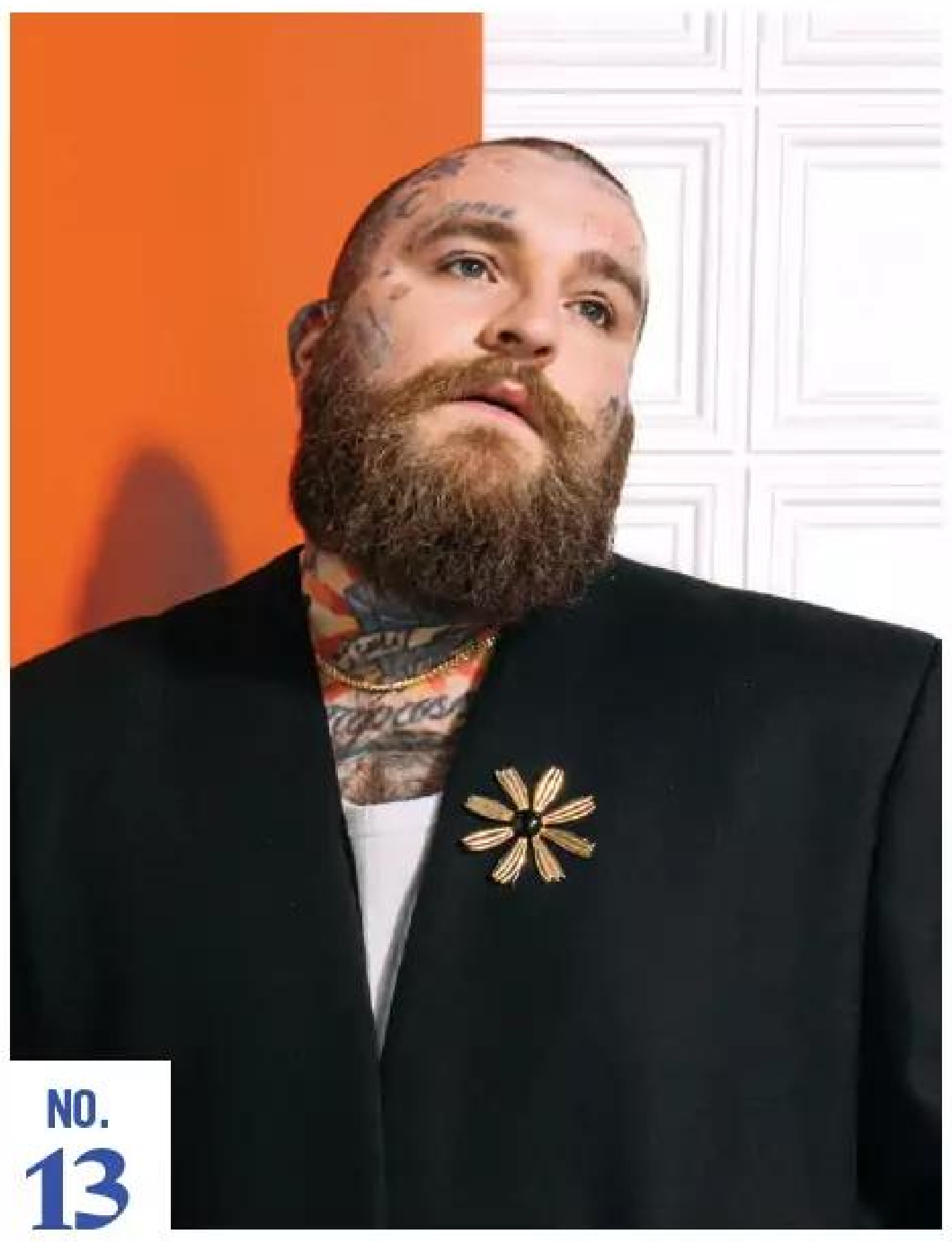
7

CHAPPELL ROAN

WEEKS ON CHART

46

The singer-songwriter's "Pink Pony Club" hits a new No. 8 high on the Billboard Hot 100. It also becomes her third top 10 on Mainstream Top 40 Airplay, making her the first artist to send three initial entries on the chart to the top tier since Olivia Rodrigo went five-for-five from the start in 2021-23. —GARY TRUST



NO. 13

'Lose Control' Wins Again

"Lose Control" by Teddy Swims (above) — which led the Billboard Hot 100 for a week in March 2024 and became the chart's year-end No. 1 — logs an 80th week on the ranking. The track is just the fourth title to reach the milestone. It trails only Glass Animals' "Heat Waves" (91 weeks in 2021-22), The Weeknd's "Blinding Lights" (90; 2019-21) and Imagine Dragons' "Radioactive" (87; 2012-14). "Lose Control" is the longest-charting hit on Warner Records, having surpassed Dua Lipa's "Levitating" (77; 2020-22). Through Feb. 27, "Lose Control" has rung up 3.8 billion in radio audience, 1.5 billion official U.S. streams and 424,000 downloads sold, according to Luminate. —G.T.

NO. 72

A Brand-New 'Bag'

Don Toliver (above) reenters the Artist 100 as his new track, "LV Bag," with j-hope, Pharrell Williams and Speedy, debuts at No. 15 on Hot Rap Songs and No. 83 on the Billboard Hot 100, among other charts. Who is Speedy? Williams' new pseudonym — which doubles as the titular subject of the song: Toliver's Louis Vuitton accessory that receives its own artist billing for the brand-checking tune, which premiered at Williams' menswear show on Jan. 21 during Paris Fashion Week. In its first week (Feb. 21-27), "LV Bag" drew 5.6 million official U.S. streams and sold 5,000 downloads. —TREVOR ANDERSON

Artist 100

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Artist	IMPRINT/LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
33	38	①	**#1 for 1 WEEK** **Tate McRae**	RCA	1	125
①	1	2	**Kendrick Lamar**	PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	1	478
6	②	3	**Sabrina Carpenter**	ISLAND/REPUBLIC	1	65
4	5	4	**Morgan Wallen**	BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	1	312
②	4	5	**SZA**	TOP DAWG/RCA	1	287
25	③	6	**Drake**	OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	1	555
7	8	7	**Chappell Roan**	KRA/AMUSEMENT/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	1	46
5	7	8	**Billie Eilish**	DARKROOM/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	1	332
3	9	9	**The Weeknd**	XO/REPUBLIC	1	503
11	12	10	**Bruno Mars**	ATLANTIC/AG	1	535
8	11	11	**Bad Bunny**	RIMAS	1	336
10	10	12	**Taylor Swift**	REPUBLIC	1	553
12	13	13	**Teddy Swims**	SWIMS INT./WARNER	3	77
13	15	14	**Tyler, The Creator**	COLUMBIA	1	193
9	14	15	**Lady Gaga**	INTERSCOPE/ICLG	1	308
14	16	16	**Jelly Roll**	BAILEE & BUDDY/STONEY CREEK/BMG/REPUBLIC	1	137
15	20	17	**Shaboozey**	AMERICAN DOGWOOD/EMPIRE	8	46
19	18	18	**Gracie Abrams**	INTERSCOPE/ICLG	2	38
16	17	19	**Post Malone**	MERCURY/REPUBLIC	1	453
(94)	⑥	20	**PARTYNEXTDOOR**	OVO SOUND/SANTA ANNA	6	18

ROAN: GILBERT FLORES FOR BILLBOARD. SWIMS: CLAIRE MARIE VOGEL. TOLIVER: COURTESY OF ATLANTIC RECORDS.

AIRPLAY, SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD ARTIST 100: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR ARTISTS ACROSS ALL GENRES, RANKED BY ALBUM AND TRACK SALES AS MEASURED BY LUMINATE, RADIO AIRPLAY AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS AS MEASURED BY LUMINATE, STREAMING ACTIVITY DATA FROM ONLINE MUSIC SOURCES TRACKED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2025 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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NO. 1

A Life In 'Song'

"Killing Me Softly With His Song" by Roberta Flack (above) leads the legend's remembrance on R&B Digital Song Sales as fans flocked to Flack's catalog following her death on Feb. 24.

"Song" swoops in at No. 1 with 7,000 downloads in the United States in the week ending Feb. 27 (up 4,867%), according to Luminate. The track, which topped the Billboard Hot 100 in 1973 and won Grammy Awards for record and song of the year, reached a new generation through the Fugees' 1996 remake. The trio's rendition earned a boost, too, as 1,000 downloads push it to No. 9 on the genre sales list.

In all, Flack claims six spots on R&B Digital Song Sales: Her other Hot 100 leaders — "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" (No. 2) and "Feel Like Makin' Love" (No. 8) — join Donny Hathaway duets "Where Is the Love" (No. 3) and "The Closer I Get to You" (No. 4) and the Peabo Bryson collaboration "Tonight, I Celebrate My Love" (No. 7).

—TREVOR ANDERSON

R&B Digital Song Sales

LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title	IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	Artist	WKS. ON CHART
RE-ENTRY	1	**#1 for 1 WEEK** **Killing Me Softly With His Song**	ATLANTIC/RHINO	**Roberta Flack**	2
NEW	2	**The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face**	ATLANTIC/RHINO	**Roberta Flack**	1
NEW	3	**Where Is The Love**	ATLANTIC/RHINO	**Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway**	1
NEW	4	**The Closer I Get To You**	ATLANTIC/RHINO	**Roberta Flack With Donny Hathaway**	1
4	5	**Boots On The Ground**	SNAKE EYEZ/KG MUSIC GROUP	**803Fresh**	7
1	6	**All The Stars**	TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE/UME	**Kendrick Lamar & SZA**	45
NEW	7	**Tonight, I Celebrate My Love**	CAPITOL/UME	**Peabo Bryson & Roberta Flack**	1
NEW	8	**Feel Like Makin' Love**	ATLANTIC/RHINO	**Roberta Flack**	1
RE-ENTRY	9	**Killing Me Softly**	RUFFHOUSE/COLUMBIA/LEGACY	**Fugees**	8
2	10	**Residuals**	CBE/RCA	**Chris Brown**	24

NO. 1

'Neverender' Begins No. 1 Run

"Neverender," the collaboration between electronic duo Justice (above) and Tame Impala, lands both acts their first No. 1 on Alternative Airplay as it leaps three places to the top of the chart. The song is Justice's first leader on an airplay-based ranking. In September, the track became the pair's first entry on any radio chart since "D.A.N.C.E.," which peaked at No. 25 on Dance/Mix Show Airplay in 2007.

"Neverender" marks the first Alternative Airplay No. 1 for Tame Impala in the act's eighth appearance on the chart. Frontman Kevin Parker's project first made the list with the No. 8-peaking "Elephant" in 2013 and has hit No. 2 twice, with "Lost in Yesterday" (2020) and as a featured act (with Bootie Brown) on Gorillaz' "New Gold" (2023). Tame Impala boasts two Triple A Airplay No. 1s: "Lost in Yesterday" and "Is It True," both in 2020.

"Neverender" is featured on *Hyperdrama*, Justice's fourth studio album, which arrived last April.

—KEVIN RUTHERFORD

Alternative Airplay

LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title	IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	Artist	WKS. ON CHART
4	1	**#1 for 1 WEEK** **Neverender**	GENESIS/ED BANGER/VIRGIN/BECAUSE	**Justice & Tame Impala**	25
3	2	**Same Old Song**	DUALTONE	**The Lumineers**	8
1	3	**The Line**	NETFLIX/RIOT GAMES/VIRGIN	**Twenty One Pilots**	14
5	4	**So Cold**	WARNER MUSIC AUSTRALIA/ATLANTIC	**Balu Brigada**	21
7	5	**Rushmere**	GENTLEMEN OF THE ROAD/GLASSNOTE	**Mumford & Sons**	6
9	6	**Messy**	DAY ONE/ISLAND/REPUBLIC	**Lola Young**	8
2	7	**Ok, But This Is The Last Time**	WABI SABI/CONCORD	**The Offspring**	19
11	8	**Heavy Is The Crown**	MACHINE SHOP/WARNER	**Linkin Park**	14
10	9	**Metaverse**	RCA	**Cage The Elephant**	7
6	10	**Detroit**	JOHN VARVATOS/BIG MACHINE	**Badflower**	28

FLACK: KPA/UNITED ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES. JUSTICE: JULIA & VINCENT.

AIRPLAY AND SALES DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE R&B DIGITAL SONG SALES: THE WEEK'S TOP DOWNLOADED R&B SONGS, AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. ALTERNATIVE AIRPLAY: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR SONGS RANKED BY ALTERNATIVE RADIO AIRPLAY DETECTIONS, AS MEASURED BY MEDIABASE AND PROVIDED BY LUMINATE. STATIONS ARE ELECTRONICALLY MONITORED 24 HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS.
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VENESTI: ANDRÉS VALLEJO. PARTYNEXTDOOR, DRAKE: COURTESY OF OVO SOUND.

NO. 1

Venesti Connects With Third No. 1

Venesti is on a roll as he secures his third total and consecutive Latin Pop Airplay No. 1, all since the start of 2024, with "Fuera de Lugar." The single's coronation follows a 37% gain to 7 million audience impressions in the United States in the week ending Feb. 27, according to Luminate.

" 'Fuera de Lugar' connects with a lot of people because we've all been through the moment of giving up on a relationship out of pride," Venesti says. The Colombian singer-songwriter's winning streak began when "No Es Normal," with Nacho and Maffio, landed at the summit in January 2024 and dominated for 10 weeks, the second-most that year. Four-week champ "No Es Normal" hit No. 1 last July.

"Fuera de Lugar" also surges 17-4 on the genre's overall Latin Airplay chart, for Venesti's fourth top 10 on that ranking. —PAMELA BUSTIOS

Latin Pop Airplay

LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	Artist	WKS. ON CHART
2	1	**#1 for 1 WEEK** **Fuera de Lugar** AP GLOBAL	**Venesti**	14
1	2	**Cosas Pendientes** PARIS LG/ROYALTY WORLD/SONY MUSIC LATIN	**Maluma**	13
3	3	**Imaginate** ATLANTIC/WARNER LATINA	**Danny Ocean & Kapo**	11
4	4	**Soltera** SONY MUSIC LATIN	**Shakira**	22
6	5	**Hoy No Me Siento Bien** SONY MUSIC LATIN	**Alejandro Sanz + Grupo Frontera**	5
7	6	**Yo Me Lo Busque** PROMOTODO	**Los Angeles Azules y Thalia**	6
5	7	**Cables Cruzados** CARBON FIBER/SONY MUSIC LATIN	**Farruko**	19
11	8	**La Carretera** SONY MUSIC LATIN	**Pedro Capo**	3
19	9	**Una Como Tu** LINKED/DYNAMIC/EMPIRE	**Jay Wheeler**	2
10	10	**Orion** SONY MUSIC LATIN	**Boza X ELENA ROSE**	26

NO. 1

$exy $ongs $tays $trong

A week after its chart-topping debut, *$ome $exy $ongs 4 U* by PartyNextDoor (above left) and Drake (above right) repeats at No. 1 on Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums. The collaborative set, released through OVO Sound/Republic/Santa Anna, compiled 119,000 equivalent album units (down 52%) in the week ending Feb. 27, according to Luminate.

Upon the debut, Drake scored his 16th No. 1 on the genre chart, tying Future for the most leaders by a soloist since the list launched in 1965. Both artists are only one chart-topper shy of matching The Temptations for the all-time mark.

Similarly, with *$ome $exy $ongs 4 U*'s debut atop the March 1-dated Billboard 200, Drake equaled Jay-Z and Taylor Swift — all have 14 No. 1s — for the most chart-toppers among soloists in the chart's 69-year history. The three superstars trail only The Beatles on the overall leaderboard, with the band notching a record 19 No. 1 albums. —TREVOR ANDERSON

Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums

LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Artist IMPRINT/DISTRIBUTING LABEL	Title	WKS. ON CHART
1	1	**#1 for 2 WEEKS** **PARTYNEXTDOOR & Drake** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC/SANTA ANNA	**$ome $exy $ongs 4 U**	2
2	2	**Kendrick Lamar** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	**GNX**	14
3	3	**SZA** TOP DAWG/RCA	**SOS**	116
4	4	**The Weeknd** XO/REPUBLIC	**Hurry Up Tomorrow**	4
7	5	**Tyler, The Creator** COLUMBIA	**CHROMAKOPIA**	18
10	6	**GG** **Post Malone** MERCURY/REPUBLIC	**The Diamond Collection**	64
5	7	**Kendrick Lamar** TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE/UME	**DAMN.**	351
6	8	**Kendrick Lamar** TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE/UME	**good kid, m.A.A.d city**	387
9	9	**BigXthaPlug** BIGXTHAPLUG/UNITEDMASTERS	**Take Care**	20
8	10	**Doechii** TOP DAWG/CAPITOL/ICLG	**Alligator Bites Never Heal**	13

AIRPLAY, SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE LATIN POP AIRPLAY: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR LATIN POP SONGS RANKED BY LATIN RADIO AIRPLAY AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS, AS MEASURED BY MEDIABASE AND PROVIDED BY LUMINATE. STATIONS ARE ELECTRONICALLY MONITORED 24 HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. TOP R&B/HIP-HOP ALBUMS: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR R&B/HIP-HOP ALBUMS, BASED ON MULTIMETRIC CONSUMPTION, BLENDING TRADITIONAL ALBUM SALES, STREAMING-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS AND TRACK-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS, AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2025 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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RYMAN

WASSERMAN MUSIC

MTG MESSINA TOURING GROUP

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market

PG. 22 AMBIENT'S AI COMPETITION
PG. 24 PUBLISHERS QUARTERLY
PG. 26 WME'S KURFIRST ON THE FESTIVALS BIZ

MUSIC AND MONEY

Bryan onstage in Las Vegas in 2024.

CHRISTOPHER POLK

Top Artists Are Choosing Stadiums Over Festivals

As more markets offer giant-size venues and bigger potential paydays, multiday music events are becoming less attractive

BY DAVE BROOKS

THE NUMBERS DON'T look good for festival promoters — and they're getting worse.

Since the end of the pandemic, the economics of stadium concerts have become so much more favorable for fans and artists that major festival promoters are losing headliners who can dependably drive ticket sales.

Take Zach Bryan. In 2023, the then-rising star headlined the Railbird Festival in Lexington, Ky.; the Two Step Inn Festival in Georgetown, Texas; the Pilgrimage Festival in Franklin, Tenn.; and Under the Big Sky in Whitefish, Mont., among the eight that he performed at that year.

After playing just two festivals last year and releasing a wildly successful fifth studio album in July, Bryan, now a superstar, had festival buyers rejoicing in September when he was announced as the opening headliner for 2025's Stagecoach festival. But instead of signing on as the top draw for other country festivals like Faster Horses or Tortuga, Bryan opted to partner with Stagecoach producer AEG Presents for 10 large-scale shows this summer, including stadium dates in New York, San Francisco and Ann Arbor, Mich., at the newly rebuilt Michigan Stadium, the largest such venue in the country, which will host Bryan as its inaugural concert.

He's not alone. Festival staples like Post Malone and Kendrick Lamar, who performed at 10 apiece in 2023, are mostly ditching those live events this summer in favor of stadium concerts in major markets like Los Angeles, where the SoFi Stadium is hosting a record 19 shows from Beyoncé, The Weeknd, Shakira, Blackpink and more during the first half of the year.

Add in stadium dates from Coldplay and Metallica and a co-headliner tour with Chris Stapleton and George Strait, and it's easy to see why festival promoters are feeling suffocated by the abundance of stadium concerts in most major markets.

"The popularity of stadium concerts represents a significant challenge to festivals," says Josh Kurfirst, a partner at WME who runs the agency's 40-person festival department (see story, page 26). From a competitive standpoint, festivals face a number of disadvantages compared with stadium concerts "that are very difficult to overcome," he explains.

The biggest of those drawbacks is the

Kennedy Center president **Deborah F. Rutter** was fired ahead of her scheduled exit after President **Donald Trump** stepped into the role.

Amazon partnered with artificial-intelligence music company **Suno** for an integration allowing Alexa users to generate songs using voice prompts.

The **Red Hot Chili Peppers’** recorded-music catalog is being shopped for upwards of $350 million.

Warner Music Group bought a controlling stake in **Tempo Music** in a deal worth around $450 million.

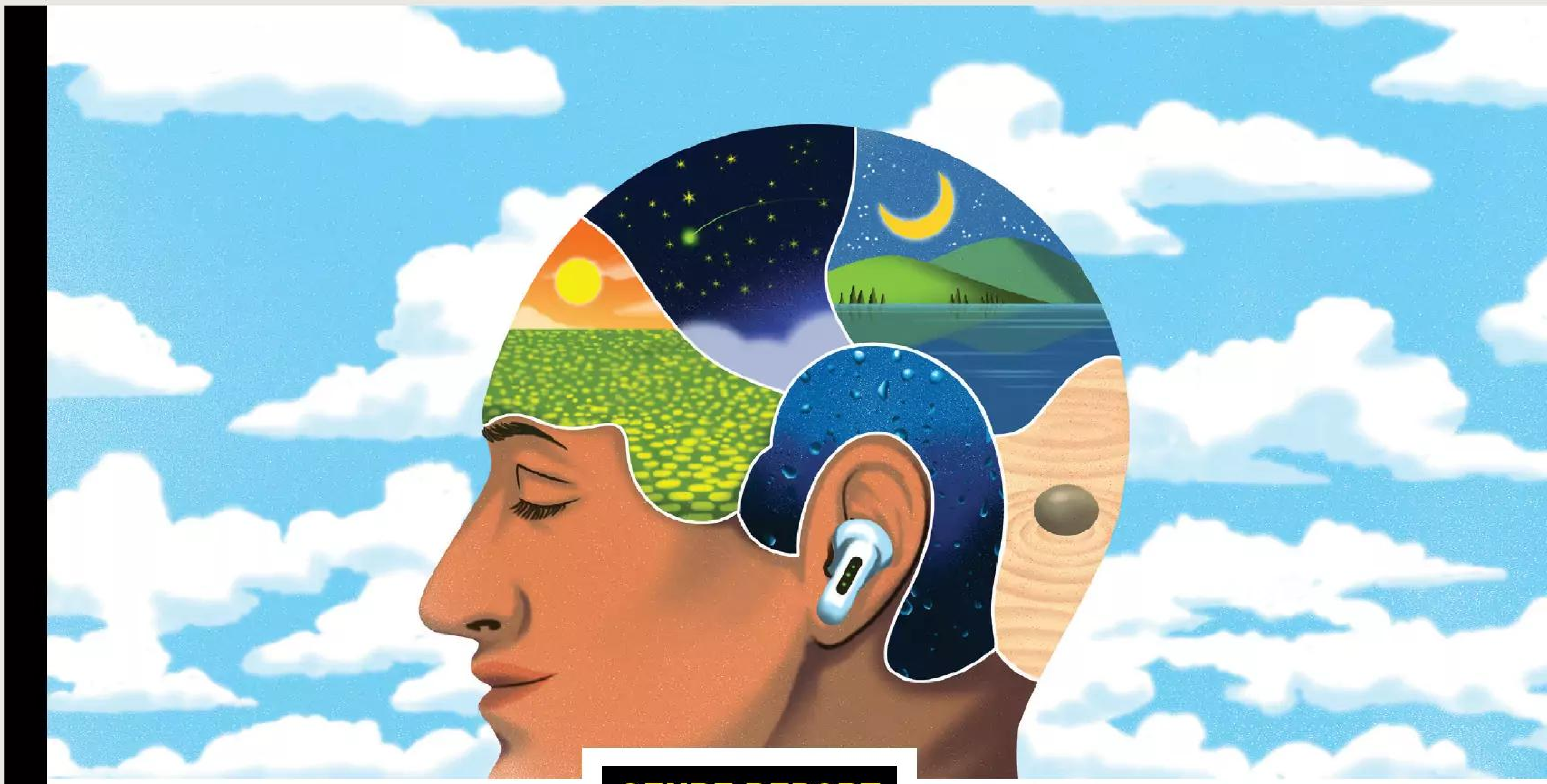
economics. At most, festival headliners earn $5 million to $6 million per appearance, while an artist with an aggressively priced stadium show can generate double that amount. The trade-off is the costs an artist pays — a festival slot has little to no costs to cover, while a stadium headliner is responsible for nearly all of the show’s expenses. On a one-to-one basis, an artist’s net from a big festival date might be the same as what the artist would earn from a stadium show. But when those costs are amortized over a dozen stadium dates, the economics heavily favor the stadiums. That’s especially true in 2025, when the number of festivals capable of paying out high-seven-figure headliner slots has dropped significantly while the number of markets hosting stadium shows has increased.

The numbers work in favor of consumers as well. Most stadium concert tickets cost $200 to $300, while festival tickets have climbed considerably in recent years to offset rising costs, often averaging $400 to $700 per attendee. And while most festivals stretch out to several days and include access to dozens of artists, “many fans would prefer to spend an afternoon at a concert seeing their favorite artists and knowing that they have a seat to sit down in and access to basic creature comforts,” says Jarred Arfa, executive vp/head of global music at Independent Artist Group.

“It’s not an apples-to-apples comparison, and there’s significantly more work involved in promoting a stadium concert than booking an artist on a festival,” Arfa continues. “But in general, a stadium concert is more appealing to older fans than a GA pass to a festival.”

That said, Arfa points out the number of acts capable of leaping from festival headliner to the top of a stadium tour lineup is quite small and that as early incubators of artists, festivals have the resources and reach needed to cultivate a new generation of top talent.

Kurfirst adds that the headliners come and go for most major festivals and that the best brands tend to be defined by their cultural significance, the fan experience and the community that supports the festival. To remain relevant, maintain ticket demand and attract star acts, he says festival organizers need to understand the appeal of their brand and “double down on superserving the fan. Find out what your audience wants and deliver it to them in a way that no one else can.”



GENRE REPORT

GENERATIVE AI’S GROWTH THREATENS AMBIENT’S ADVANCE

The technology’s ability to create background soundscapes in real time — and the recording industry’s opposition to functional music — could stall a burgeoning genre

WHAT IS AMBIENT? If you take genre pioneer Brian Eno’s word for it, it is music designed to be “as ignorable as it is interesting.”

Currently, it’s recognized as anything from works by Max Richter, Jon Hopkins and Aphex Twin to mood and wellness soundscapes like “Sleepy Rain Sounds,” “Healing Harps” and “Binaural Beats.” Because it often serves as background music — typically on wellness and focus playlists — even its most popular artists generally don’t become mainstream superstars. But there is serious money to be made — if artificial intelligence (AI) and the recording industry’s opposition to “functional music” don’t stall its progress.

“Since editorial [streaming] playlists formed, there’s been a very steady rise in consumption for ambient,” says Brando Hartt, ambient and lo-fi A&R executive for Downtown Music Holdings. And in recent years, a number of labels have formed to feed that demand. Some began playing what Hartt calls a “volume game,” releasing a deluge of quickly made tracks with no marketing in hopes of clinching a playlist feature. *Billboard* recently reported that editorial playlists don’t drive streams the way they once did for mainstream genres like pop and rap, but that’s not true for ambient music. Apple Music’s Sleep Sounds is the service’s No. 1 playlist, and eight of the platform’s top 20 playlists are ambient or wellness-oriented.

In 2020, ambient jazz artist Corey Gordon experienced firsthand the benefit of being playlisted. He self-released *Ambi Tape* to streaming services, and the “15 plays a day” he says he was getting grew to 15,000 current listeners when the EP’s final track, “Ambi 25,” ended up on Spotify’s Deep Sleep playlist, earning him millions of streams.

That same year, the founders of pop/R&B label Avant Garden, Azad Naficy and Brittany Crawford, started Peace of Mind Studio. Like many, they were attracted to ambient music during lockdown and use a small-batch business strategy: thoughtfully curated wellness music as a way to help artists of varying genres support themselves with music full time. They say multiple signees now make over $500,000 a year from their ambient work.

There are still threats ahead for this fast-growing genre. With the breakneck evolution of generative AI, some fear it will further eat into opportunities for creatives in the genre. Already, AI companies like Endel (which is considered to be ethically trained), Suno and Udio are able to generate realistic soundscapes that mimic the work of human artists.

Moves by the recorded-music industry to change the streaming model also represent a threat. Universal Music Group chairman/CEO Lucian Grainge has spoken out multiple times against “functional music,” or “nonmusic,” including bird sounds, white noise and other audio that generate billions of streams, sometimes while listeners are asleep. Grainge would like it to earn a lesser royalty. At *Billboard*’s Power 100 event in 2023, he asked: “Are we on the side of fintech and functional music, functional content? Or are we on the side of artistry and artists?” While not all ambient music fits this category, some fear it targets the more experimental fringes of the genre.

“I hate that stance,” says Jordan Smith, co-founder of lo-fi/ambient label Arden Records. “We’ve done a lot of nature stuff, including a project with the National Parks, where we’ve released nature sounds. Our artists will literally go on a hike and field-record it. They’ve spent time, effort and energy. They shouldn’t be penalized because it’s a different way of listening.”

—KRISTIN ROBINSON

ILLUSTRATION BY GLENN HARVEY

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TO OUR FRIENDS
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MUSIC
AWARDS

FOR 60 YEARS

BIG LOUD

Universal Music Group and the **Music Health Alliance** launched the **Music Industry Mental Health Fund** for U.S. industry professionals.

HYBE partnered with **Ryan Tedder** to form a new global boy band.

WARNER CHAPPELL TOPS RADIO AIRPLAY, HOT 100 AND COUNTRY CHARTS FOR THE FIRST TIME

Gigi Perez debuts among the top 10 Hot 100 publishers thanks to her breakthrough hit, "Sailor Song"

BY KRISTIN ROBINSON

FOR THE FIRST TIME in the history of *Billboard's* Publishers Quarterly rankings, Warner Chappell swept the Hot 100 Songs, Top Radio Airplay and Country Airplay charts in the fourth quarter of 2024.

Although the music publisher's Nashville division typically places first or second on the Country Airplay chart, this is the first time it has topped the Hot 100 publishers ranking and the first time since the third quarter of 2019 that it ranked No. 1 on the Top Radio Airplay list.

Warner Chappell had a stake in 64 songs and a 25.29% market share on the Radio Airplay list, and 49 songs and a 23.62% market share on the Hot 100 Songs list, including the No. 1 song of the quarter for both charts: "A Bar Song (Tipsy)" by Shaboozey. The publisher is also home to the No. 1 Top Radio Airplay songwriter for Q4 of 2024, Amy Allen, who wrote Sabrina Carpenter's "Espresso" and six other charting tracks.

Shaboozey

Sony Music Publishing, which was the No. 1 radio and Hot 100 publisher for the third quarter of 2024, ranked second on both charts, with 63 songs on the radio list (a 24.10% market share), and 58 on the Hot 100 (22.68%). Its top song for both charts was also "A Bar Song (Tipsy)."

Universal Music Publishing Group finished third for both the Hot 100 (19.92% market share, 44 songs) and Top Radio Airplay (16.79% market share, 42 songs) charts in the fourth quarter and also held a piece of the Shaboozey smash. With nine songs on the Hot 100 — but none in the top 10 — Kendrick Lamar was the No. 1 songwriter on that chart, thanks to the ongoing success of "Not Like Us."

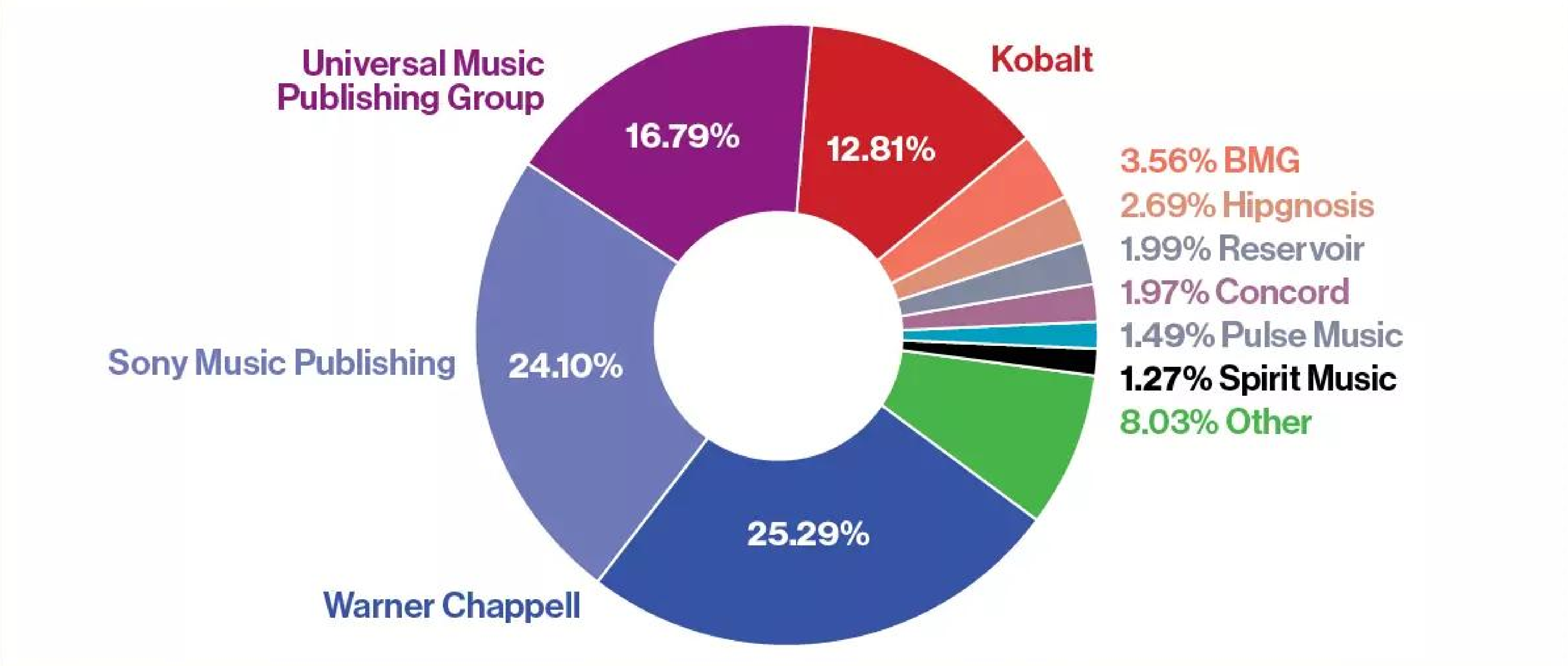
Gaga

Kobalt comfortably finished fourth — the best performance by an independent publisher — on both fourth-quarter charts, twin rankings it frequently holds on these lists. The publisher's radio airplay market share was 12.81%, and it has 10.89% on the Hot 100. Its biggest songs of the quarter were "Too Sweet" by Hozier (No. 2 on Top Radio Airplay) and "Die With a Smile" by Lady Gaga & Bruno Mars (No. 2 on the Hot 100).

BMG ranked fifth on both charts, rising two spots from its radio airplay ranking in third quarter 2024 and up one from its Hot 100 ranking in the same quarter.

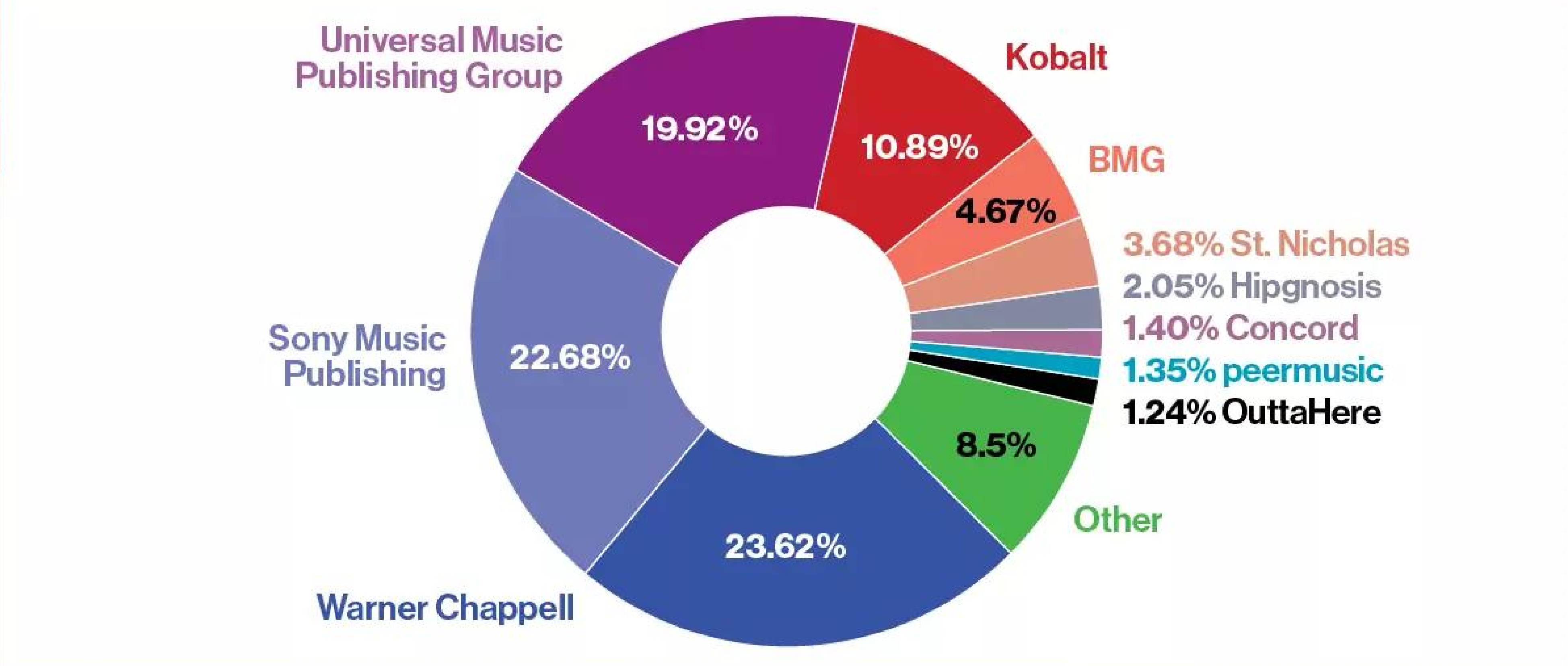
The bottom of the Hot 100 top 10 also held a surprise: OuttaHere is the name under which singer-songwriter Gigi Perez publishes her work. The viral success of her "Sailor Song" makes her the first self-published artist to land on the chart since Luke Combs' cover of Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car" put her Purple Rabbit Music on the ranking in 2023 and 2024. **b**

Top Radio Airplay: Publishers*



Rank	Title	Artist	Imprint/Promotion Label
1	**"A Bar Song (Tipsy)"**	Shaboozey	EMPIRE
2	**"Too Sweet"**	Hozier	Columbia
3	**"Espresso"**	Sabrina Carpenter	Island
4	**"I Am Not Okay"**	Jelly Roll	BBR Music Group/Jelly Roll/Republic Records
5	**"Stargazing"**	Myles Smith	RCA
6	**"Birds of a Feather"**	Billie Eilish	Interscope Geffen A&M
7	**"Die With a Smile"**	Lady Gaga & Bruno Mars	Interscope Geffen A&M
8	**"I Had Some Help"**	Post Malone featuring Morgan Wallen	Mercury/Republic Records
9	**"Taste"**	Sabrina Carpenter	Island Records
10	**"Beautiful Things"**	Benson Boone	Warner Records

Hot 100 Songs: Publishers*



Rank	Title	Artist	Imprint/Promotion Label
1	**"A Bar Song (Tipsy)"**	Shaboozey	American Dogwood/EMPIRE/Magnolia Music
2	**"Die With a Smile"**	Lady Gaga & Bruno Mars	Streamline/Interscope/Atlantic/ICLG
3	**"Birds of a Feather"**	Billie Eilish	Darkroom/Interscope/ICLG
4	**"Espresso"**	Sabrina Carpenter	Island/Republic
5	**"I Had Some Help"**	Post Malone featuring Morgan Wallen	Mercury/Big Loud/Republic
6	**"Taste"**	Sabrina Carpenter	Island/Republic
7	**"Lose Control"**	Teddy Swims	SWIMS Int./Warner
8	**"All I Want for Christmas Is You"**	Mariah Carey	Columbia/Legacy
9	**"Beautiful Things"**	Benson Boone	Night Street/Warner
10	**"Timeless"**	The Weeknd & Playboi Carti	XO/Republic

*For the Top 10 Publishers Top Radio Airplay chart, percentage calculations were based upon the overall top 100 detecting songs from 3,053 U.S. radio stations electronically monitored by Luminate 24 hours a day, seven days a week during the period of Oct. 1 to Dec. 31, 2024. For Top 10 Publishers Hot 100 Songs, percentage calculations were based upon the top 100 songs as ranked by Billboard Hot 100 points calculated from digital sales, streaming and Luminate-tracked radio airplay detections during the period of Sept. 27 to Dec. 26, 2024, reflecting the issue dates of Oct. 12 through Dec. 26, 2024. Publisher information for musical works on both charts has been identified by the Harry Fox Agency. A "publisher" is defined as an administrator, copyright owner and/or controlling party.

SHABOOZEY: CARLOS GONZALEZ FOR PENSKE MEDIA. GAGA: SAMIR HUSSEIN/WIREIMAGE.

NMPA CONGRATULATES

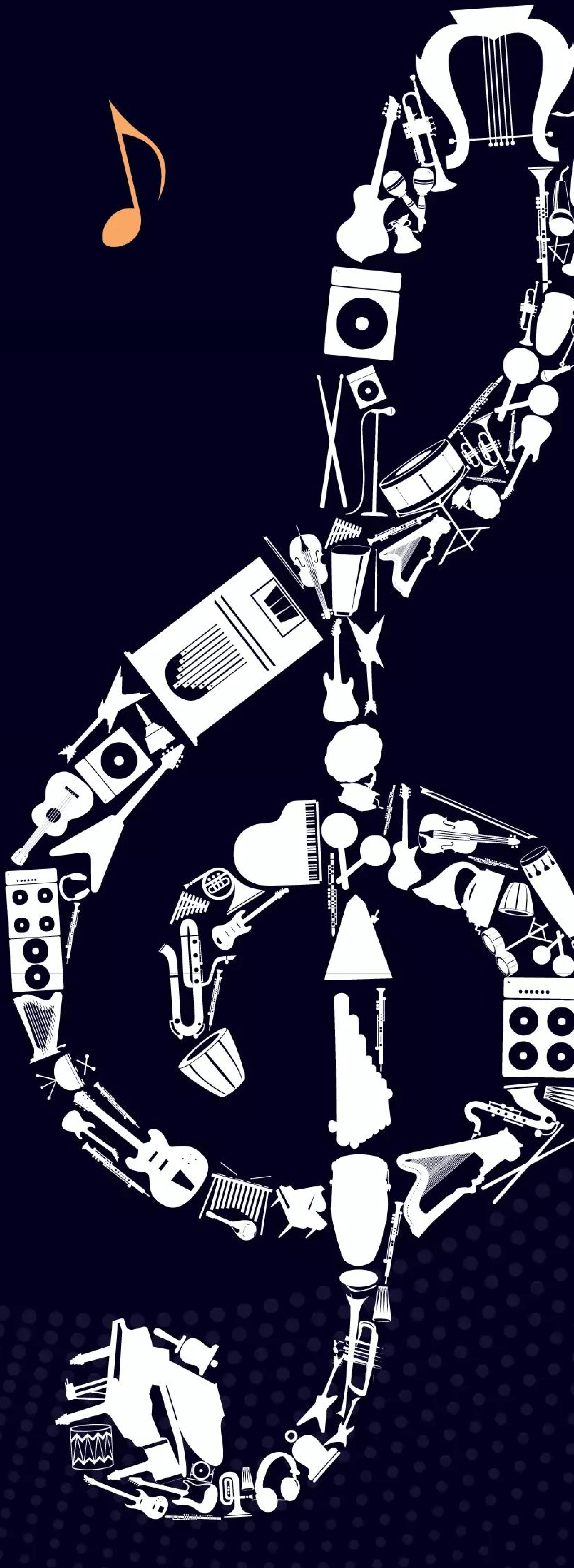
TOP Q1 PUBLISHERS

Hot 100

Warner Chappell Music
Sony Music Publishing
Universal Music Publishing Group
Kobalt
BMG
St. Nicholas Music
Hipgnosis
Concord Music Publishing
peermusic

Radio Airplay

Warner Chappell Music
Sony Music Publishing
Universal Music Publishing Group
Kobalt
BMG
Hipgnosis
Reservoir
Concord Music Publishing
Pulse Music
Spirit Music Group



NMPA
IS ABOUT THE SONGS

Kurfirst photographed Jan. 25 at WME in New York.

From The Desk Of... Josh Kurfirst

GLOBAL HEAD OF FESTIVALS, WME

BY DAVE BROOKS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DeSEAN McCLINTON-HOLLAND

AFTER A DIFFICULT 2024 in which a number of major festivals closed their doors for good, Coachella sales were down and Burning Man didn't sell out, WME global head of festivals Josh Kurfirst says, "Protecting the health of the festival business has become central to everything we do.

"It's no longer an incoming-call business," says Kurfirst, the son of Gary Kurfirst, former manager of Talking Heads, the Ramones, Blondie, The B-52s, Jane's Addiction and Garbage. Early on, the job of most festival agents, Kurfirst explains, was to field offers from festival talent buyers for artists on the WME roster, negotiate where the artist's name would appear on the festival poster and review daily ticket sales drops. But as the market matured and evolved, he instructed his staff to get more aggressive about pitching WME acts to prospective buyers and finding opportunities for them to bookend tours and live shows around festival appearances.

"Everything is strategic," he says. "It's not, 'Let's just throw 300 bands on this festival because it's easy.' We don't do things easy."

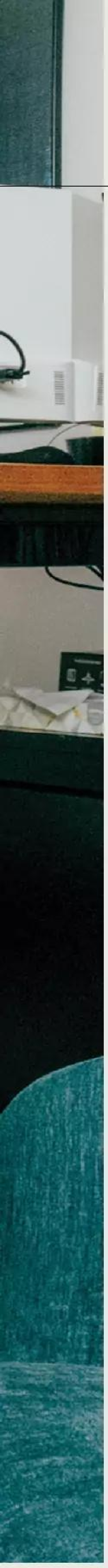
Despite the cancellations of such once-popular festival brands as Faster Horses, Sick New World, Something in the Water and Alter Ego, Kurfirst and his team have plenty of success stories to tell. This year, his team helped land Zach Bryan his first headliner date atop the Stagecoach festival, secure newcomer Benson Boone a top slot on the Coachella lineup, book The Killers as headliners for Lollapalooza and secure headliner slots for Luke Combs, Olivia Rodrigo, Hozier and Queens of the Stone Age at Bonnaroo.

2024 was a tough year for festival sales. What happened?

First, it's important to acknowledge that the festival market has significantly increased in size in the last decade. When I first started, there was a smaller group of giant festivals that had most of the market share. Since then, we've seen the emergence of a middle tier, a lower tier, a genre-specific tier and a lifestyle branch of festivals. And those have taken some market share away from the crossover contemporaries — the Coachellas, the Lollapaloozas and the Bonnaroos of the world. There's really something out there for everyone now as long as you're willing to travel. Look at Morgan Wallen's new Sand in My Boots festival on the same site as the old Hangout Festival, which had been a steady market for years. Some years it sold out. Some years, it came close, but it never blew out on the on-sale. All of a sudden, Wallen comes in and launches his own festival on the site and it sells out instantly.

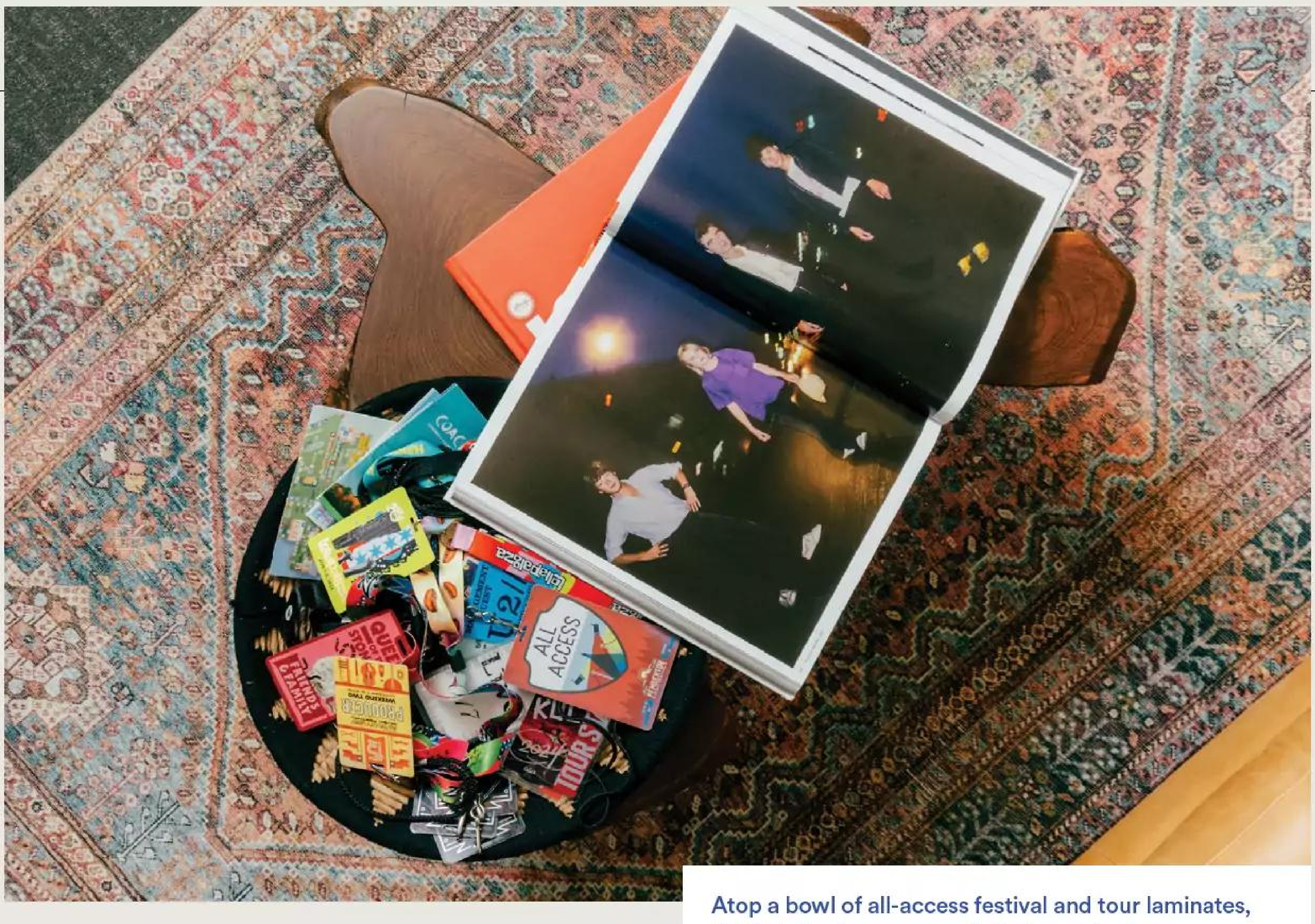
What did Wallen do differently from Hangout Festival?

Instead of trying to create an event that appealed to as many people as possible, Wallen created an event that overdelivered to his fan base. He rebranded the festival under his own name and booked more than a dozen similar artists that he believes will connect with his fans. [This year's lineup includes Bailey



Universal Music Group Nashville named **Mike Harris** CEO and **Dave Cobb** chief creative officer following **Cindy Mabe's** exit.

TikTok global head of music business development **Ole Obermann** will exit his role, with **Tracy Gardner** succeeding him.



Atop a bowl of all-access festival and tour laminates, Kurfirst displays a copy of photographer Lynn Goldsmith's *Music in the '80s* book, open to a shot of the Talking Heads, whom his father, Gary, managed.

Kurfirst's mother, Phyllis, created this framed collage that, in addition to ticket stubs from concerts that Gary promoted, depicts (clockwise from top) Phyllis and her pet huskies; Gary and Phyllis at his parents' house; and at their alma mater, Forest Hills High School.

Kurfirst with his four kids. From left: Landon, 17; Ariela, 11; Eden, 11; and Lucas, 21.

FOO FIGHT
JUNE 20, 20
MADISON SQUARE
TONIGHT SOLD OUT
MADISON SQUARE GARDEN
Måneskin
RUSH! WORLD TOUR
TONIGHT SOLD OUT
NEW YORK, NY
MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

Pillows commemorating Madison Square Garden shows by artist clients whom Kurfirst represents in addition to overseeing WME's festival division.

Zimmerman, Post Malone, Wiz Khalifa and The War on Drugs.] If you're a fan of Morgan Wallen, then you won't want to miss out on the Sand in My Boots festival. And, by the way, if you live in the Southeast, it might be your only chance to see him play this year.

How are overall festival sales so far, compared with 2024?
Last year was interesting. It wasn't just straight down. It was choppy water. This year is still early. Most of the festivals just announced their lineups, and from what I'm hearing, it's been positive. The overall market feels like a bounce-back year, and a lot of that has to do with the headliners. We've had a solid crop emerge — Olivia Rodrigo and Hozier, for instance. To a young artist like Olivia, these festivals mean something. It's a notch on her belt and a way to do something in her career that she hadn't done before.

How do you judge success at WME?
It's not based on quantity or how many festival slots WME artists are on. We're very selective. We're building careers. And we want to make sure when it's our clients, they're in the right cycle in terms of their music cycle. Typically, that means the artist has new music ready for the fans to discover and plans for either touring or other dates that they want to build momentum behind. They're going to play the right slot, they're going to get the right billing, they're going to get the right money. That's the time to play the festival. If any of those things are off, we'll just do our own thing — meaning, we'll work with a promoter, headline our own tour and continue building their hard-ticket business, which is incredibly important for all our artists.

Are festivals still a healthy launching pad for an artist's career?
They are a good developing mechanism for new artists, but again, it has to be the right moment. I don't know that it would make sense to just throw a new artist that doesn't have any music out on a festival [stage] at 12:30 p.m. when the doors open. That's a wasted booking. It would be better for that artist to be in cycle, have music out, have some press, garner some reviews ahead of time, so people actually have the ability to do their research and [want to] show up in front of their stage.

The festival market has had an uptick in cancellations in recent years. In that environment, how does WME maintain a positive relationship with promoters?
We look at the promoters as our partners. They're not on the other side of the table; they're on the same side of the table. We want them to succeed, and we have their backs. In return, they have our backs, too.

What does it mean to have each other's backs?
With festivals, artists sometimes have to cancel. Sometimes they get sick, they break a leg, the album gets pushed. Sometimes it's our clients. Sometimes it's clients from other agencies. What we do in those situations is we don't bury our heads in the sand. If it's a Saturday at 3 p.m. or 7 p.m. or 7 a.m., we're there for our buyers to fill that slot that suddenly becomes open. And because we book things through one point of contact, the buyer only has to contact one person at WME. That's his partner, his festival agent, and that festival agent then canvasses the entire roster and can come back with real-time avails within hours.

Are you bullish on the long-term prospects of the festival business?
It's a very Darwinian environment out there and the strong will survive. There are times where we have to have tough conversations with our promoter partners and come to a fair settlement where our clients feel good, but where we don't put the promoter out of business. Because that doesn't help anyone. Make no mistake: When we do a deal, our clients are entitled to 100% of the money if a festival cancels due to poor sales. There are some reasons why a promoter can cancel, like a pandemic. But in most cases, if a festival is canceled, it's due to poor sales or some sort of promoter breach, and our clients are entitled to 100% of the money. It's our job to come up with a fair settlement where the client feels good and the promoter is able to get back up on their feet.

What's one of the most important lessons your father taught you?
He taught me that loving what you do is the single most important decision we make as adults. If you don't, you can't bring passion to the job every day. He also taught me about not trying to be someone else. Don't just go with the trend. He equated that in how he chose the artists he wanted to work with, whether it be the Talking Heads, the Ramones, The B-52s, the Eurythmics, Jane's Addiction and Mountain. These bands weren't genre-defining — they invented their genres. b

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2025

TOP MUSIC LAWYERS

Behind every artist, songwriter and music producer is a trusted group of advisers who provide guidance, advice and negotiate deals. *Billboard*'s 10th annual Top Music Lawyers list will recognize the biggest names and most prominent legal minds in the world of music and entertainment law. They are the deal-makers behind the major contracts and lawsuits in the music industry.

This feature will also include a round-up of premier law schools attended by the notable alumni on the Top Music Lawyers list.

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ISSUE DATE 4/19 | AD CLOSE 4/8 | MATERIALS DUE 4/10

sound

NOW PLAYING

MENS TOILETS
BAR
LADIES TOILETS
G-Flame
G-Flame

Spiritbox onstage at Alexandra Palace in London on Feb. 13.

Spirited Away

After years of “figuring out who they are,” the members of hard rock act Spiritbox could explode with their second album

BY JASON LIPSHUTZ

ALEX BEMIS

LaPlante in London.

FOR MY OWN MUSIC, I really like to have endless possibilities," Spiritbox leader Courtney LaPlante says. The singer believes the metal world is too preoccupied with subgenres — helpful for listeners looking for distinct flavors of heavy music but constricting for acts that want to scribble outside their assigned hard rock lines.

LaPlante says other genres aren't quite as strict: "Look at the first few records that Doechii made and then look at the next three — there are a lot of polar opposites," she says. "I feel like there's a drive for artists for each album or body of work to be its own thing."

Although Spiritbox trades in modern metalcore, the Canadian quartet has become one of the biggest new hard rock acts of the decade by reaching beyond its sonic boundaries: On its 2021 debut, *Eternal Blue*, which has earned 230,000 equivalent album units, according to Luminate, the band supplemented bone-crunching riffs with hints of synth-pop, prog rock and R&B. The 36-year-old LaPlante, who's adept at guttural screaming as well as soulful crooning, drives that diverse palette.

"She's an encyclopedia of music in general," says Mike Stringer, Spiritbox's guitarist and LaPlante's husband, a few minutes before LaPlante gushes about the latest FKA twigs album and Kate Bush's back catalog. "We've always had this open-door policy of, 'If we enjoy it and it's catchy, we'll probably release it.' "

Tsunami Sea, the band's long-awaited second album, does indeed feature some of its biggest hooks to date as well as some of the group's most thrash-ready moments, often in the same song. Released March 7 on Pale Chord/Rise Records, the album arrives on a wave of hype, with two consecutive Grammy Award nods for best metal performance and all three of the album's prerelease tracks — the blistering "Soft Spine," melodic "Perfect Soul" and electro-tinged "No Loss, No Love" — cracking the top 20 of Hot Hard Rock Songs.

The act opened for bands like Korn, Shinedown and Papa Roach over the past two years but was also tapped by Megan Thee Stallion to remix her song "Cobra" in 2023. Most importantly, manager Jason Mageau says, "They've spent the past few years figuring out who they are."

Rising from the ashes of metal group Iwrestledabearonce in 2017, Spiritbox — whose lineup also includes bassist Josh Gilbert and drummer Zev Rosenberg — spent its first four years weathering personnel changes and gathering early singles for EP releases. While the 2020 singles "Blessed Be" and "Holy Roller" went viral online, the pandemic upended the rollout for *Eternal Blue*, including touring. "At that moment in time, they had played under 10 shows together," Mageau says. "So we really took our time building that live show, taking some support opportunities and learning from them."

Spiritbox released two more EPs, 2022's *Rotoscope* and 2023's *The Fear of Fear*, to tide over fans who were eager for new material as the band played hard rock tours and festivals. *Tsunami Sea* took roughly two years to write and complete during gaps in that touring schedule, with 30 song ideas whittled down to the most cohesive 11-track project the group could make.

"It was a very intense process near the end, but I think I had a lot more fun writing for this record than I did *Eternal Blue*," Stringer says, "and I feel like it has more of an identity to it." Because the album follows a more extensive touring history, Spiritbox finished the new songs with a better understanding of how they might translate onstage and more consideration of LaPlante's live vocals. "We know ourselves musically, as we're getting older and discovering more about what we can actually achieve," she says. "For the first time now, when we write stuff, I feel confident. It [only] took 20 years."

After performing some prerelease shows in Europe, Spiritbox will begin a spring global headlining tour on April 3 in Dallas and then join Linkin Park for select stadium shows in the summer. When asked about commercial goals for *Tsunami Sea* — considering that *Eternal Blue* peaked at No. 13 on the Billboard 200, its follow-up could become the band's first 10 entry — Mageau shrugs off anything empirical.

"I really want them to just be themselves. They've been a support band for two years — let's show them what we're made of," he says. "It's been all about finding new areas to insert our band into mainstream conversations and try to bring more women into the space, too. When this band first started, the female listenership on Spotify would be, like, 10%. Now we're in the 30% range of women listening to the band, and [LaPlante] wants that to increase even more."

For her part, LaPlante says that being among the fast-rising women in metal is a galvanizing force for a band trying to turn its expanding audiences into safe spaces. "I love the fact that I see all different ages and genders at our shows and kids presenting in any way they want," she says. "They're not there because I'm a woman and they're not there despite me being a woman. They all just heard our siren call and we found each other." **b**

BEHIND THE HIT

"Tell Me"

Aujla (left) and Tedder

SIX MONTHS AGO, Ryan Tedder's longtime friend, producer-songwriter Savan Kotecha, texted him about an artist he thought Tedder should be aware of: the pioneering Punjabi star Karan Aujla. "He sent me a link and I was like, 'Yeah, I already know who this guy is,' " Tedder recalls today.

While performing with OneRepublic at Lollapalooza India in January 2024, Tedder asked locals and the band's promoter "who's popping" in India. They all mentioned Aujla. "I went and listened to the music and I was like, 'Oh, this is super tight. This is different,' " he says. Tedder explains that while Punjabi is a language native to the Punjab regions of India and Pakistan, it is also emerging as its own subgenre across South Asia — and growing globally, too.

After mentioning Aujla, Kotecha introduced Tedder to Aujla's friend and producer, Ikky, who played Tedder a few in-progress tracks upon meeting him in Los Angeles, including one called "Dassde" at the time. "I was like, 'This is crazy.' I asked him what the phrase meant, and he said it means 'Tell me.' " In addition to OneRepublic featuring on the song, Tedder is credited as co-producer.

"Before this collaboration, Ikky and I always used to talk about how we wanted to do something out here with our music," Aujla, 28, tells Tedder while sitting next to him during this interview. "And then he mentioned you guys were talking and I thought he was kidding. And then I remember being on tour, Ikky sends me a rough draft and the first thing I hear is [Tedder] singing. And then it's me jumping in with my Punjabi verse. I was like, 'Oh, shit. It's a Punjabi-English track.' "

The finished version of "Tell Me" — which prominently features tabla (hand drums) and has a "swung" cadence, according to Tedder — arrived Feb. 27. Aujla believes the timing could not have been better. "People in India want English on Indian records," he says. "People are already into it. My main thing is I want to make the first Punjabi record that goes everywhere."

"Honestly," adds Tedder, "he's one of the main reasons Punjabi music has exploded. He was the right person at the right time."

—LYNDSEY HAVENS

LAPLANTE: ALEX BEMIS. AUJLA: TARAN SODHI.

AZZARO
STOP TALKING, START PLAYING!
NEW
ELIXIR
AZZARO
WANTED
SEBASTIÁN YATRA

Q & A

Lady Gaga Courted 'Chaos' To Make *Mayhem*

FRANK LEBON

"WILL SHE OUTDO HERSELF? Can she top herself? Can she live up to this? She needs to evolve. She hasn't changed enough.' "

Sitting in a New York hotel conference room during a press junket, Lady Gaga is reflecting on 17 years' worth of public expectations, the questions lobbed at her career since it launched in 2008. "There was a lot of noise," she says with a shrug. "And I was young, too."

Even as she approaches two decades in the music industry, Gaga still keeps an eye on what the world has to say about her, good and bad. But now, at 38, the singer knows how to use those expectations to her advantage. *Mayhem*, the star's long-awaited seventh studio album (released March 7 on Interscope), takes years of preconceived notions and funnels them through her distinct artistic lens. Oscillating between industrial techno on "Perfect Celebrity"; rave-ready dance-pop on single "Abracadabra"; and even soulful balladry on her chart-topping Bruno Mars collaboration, "Die With a Smile," Gaga had one goal in creating *Mayhem*: "Go with the chaos."

Blending the sounds of her earliest smashes with updated musical flourishes, Gaga ended up creating a dark, chaotic rumination on fame, identity and the stories we tell ourselves. Or, as she puts it: "It's not exactly what you've heard from me before, but there is the DNA of my approach to pop music."

***Mayhem* takes listeners on a linear journey from dark to light, from chaos to calm. What appealed to you about that emotional arc for this album?**
It naturally happened that way. There have been times in my career where I had an idea in terms of how to conceptually approach a record. But I would say that this album, from start to finish, was like pieces coming together, and I did not want to turn it into anything artificial. I really wanted to allow myself to just follow the music. By doing that, it started to slowly remind me of my earlier work. [With] the mayhem of my approach to pop music — which is something that is mine and that I feel proud of — I did want the chaos to end.

When you announced the album's title, you said part of this project came from "facing a fear" of returning to your earlier pop sound. What made you fearful?
I think I felt a lot of pressure. Ever since my first album [2008's *The Fame*], I did listen to what people would say. I'm 38 now, I'm a lot more confident in myself, but I think I found my confidence in this record. Making this album and taking the pressure off myself helped me to value what I feel really matters about me as a person: the people that I love and putting my musicianship first. When [I] took the other stuff away — the competition of it all, some of which is being a woman in music — it gave me so much dignity. And I didn't realize how much I was craving that.

You've made a point throughout your career to work with different producers on almost every project, including Andrew Watt and Cirkut on *Mayhem*. Why is it vital to keep bringing in new people?
What I look for in collaborators are people that will uphold me as a woman in the studio and follow my vision. I really wanted to be myself [on this album] — I've always been myself in my music, but there have been times I wanted to change who I was. This was different. I tried, musically, to work with people that I could push myself with.

I love a big sweeping melody, I love a big chorus, I love multiple hooks, I love a great bridge — there's things that need to happen in [my music]. As the musical landscape changes, I think it's OK to be influenced by it, but it's also OK to know who you are and to just be you.

Singles "Die With a Smile" and "Abracadabra" have both become chart hits, topping the Billboard Hot 100 and Hot Dance/Pop Songs charts, respectively. How does that make you feel?
I am really grateful, and I am really beside myself. I never expect anything like this because you never know; all you can do is your best. Social media was so different when I started to where it is now. I've seen Little Monsters be so amazing for almost 20 years. I haven't seen us like this in a long time. Like, I'm so grateful to have access to everybody's content! Seriously! Between the dancing, the makeup, the hair, the costumes, it gives me so much life. All I ever want to do is make something that you press "play" and you feel good for the duration of the record, and maybe you play it again because you want to do it one more time.

You've been very active commenting on and sharing fans' posts about the album. Why is it important to give that love back to them?
That's the way we always were — it just wasn't to this extent, because we didn't have the same tools to talk to each other. We've been having this conversation through art and fashion and politics for a long time. How could I not? I always say that I have the best seat in the house, because I get to watch the fans.

—STEPHEN DAW

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Wetzel photographed
Jan. 22 in Pittsburg, Texas.

WELCOME TO KOE COUNTRY

Deep in the heart of Texas with **KOE WETZEL**, the (slightly reformed) rabble-rouser whose raw, rock-infused twang is climbing the charts

BY MELINDA NEWMAN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERIC RYAN ANDERSON

SXSW

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ON THE BRICK WALL facing the Pittsburg Hot Links parking lot, a mural memorializes the small East Texas town's most famous citizens, including Mean Gene the Hot Link King and Homer Jones, the New York Giants receiver who invented spiking the football after a touchdown.

Soon enough, Pittsburg native Koe Wetzel could be right up there with them. "Maybe [after] a couple more No. 1s," Wetzel muses as he looks up at those faces. He sounds dubious that he has earned his spot quite yet, but the 32-year-old singer-songwriter is well on his way. His breakthrough hit about a volatile relationship, "High Road" with Jessie Murph, spent five weeks at No. 1 on *Billboard*'s Country Airplay chart in December and January. "I know the folks who own the place," he adds with a laugh. "I might go buy some watercolors and paint it myself."

Wetzel may not believe he's a local legend yet, but it's clear that here in his hometown, his star status is confirmed. As he strides across the crosswalk *Abbey Road*-style in historic Downtown Pittsburg at 8:30 a.m., a fan sticks his head out of a store door and yells "My hero!" his way. Wetzel left Pittsburg (population: 4,335) when he was 18 to attend Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas, on a football scholarship as a linebacker. He now lives outside Fort Worth, but his roots run through his gritty brand of country rock, which he delivers in a powerful twang that draws on the long tradition of Texas outlaw country and confessional storytellers like Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark.

> **"I feel like every time I'm [writing], it peels back a layer of who I am. I find something that I didn't know was there. Whenever you get the song completed, there's no more holes in it."**
>
> **—WETZEL**

"Koe is the epitome of an artist that is writing his own narrative," Jelly Roll tells *Billboard* of Wetzel, whom he toured with in 2022 on the wryly titled Role Models outing. "He's not writing what everyone else writes. He's not trying to write another person's narrative; he's writing the way he naturally feels. I've been a fan of his for a long time — since his first project."

Whatever he's singing about — turbulent romances, getting busted for drunk driving or popping pills to get to sleep after a show — in song and conversation, Wetzel is unashamedly himself, with no apologies and no regrets, just like his namesake, country rabble-rouser David Allan Coe. "I was probably conceived to a David Allan Coe song," he speculates. (His full name is Ropyr Madison Koe Wetzel; "My mom was pretty indecisive," he says with a playful shake of his head at the multiple names.)

By the time he got kicked out of college his sophomore year for "having too good a time," Wetzel was already playing shows and focused more on music than books. "Being a Texas artist, you can tour year-round here in Texas. A lot of people do and make a damn good living at it," he says. "Coming up, that was kind of my main goal and pretty much my only goal."

Jeb Hurt, who has managed Wetzel since 2019, recalls seeing him at a 300-capacity venue in San Marcos, Texas, in 2016. "If there were 200 there, 125 of them were college girls, and they were crammed against the stage screaming every word back to the band," he says. Hurt, then a booking agent, quickly signed Wetzel, whose audiences grew exponentially through word-of-mouth. "If it was 200 people, the next time there were 400, then 800," Hurt says. "Next thing you know, we're in 5,000-cap venues in 24 months."

Now, Wetzel — who signed with Columbia Records in 2020 — is building his audience around the rest of the country and the world. He toured in Europe last year and will play Australia in March. "It used to be about having a good time, making rent, making gas money to get to the next show," Wetzel reflects. "And now it's completely different. It's wild to see where it's come from and where we're at."

While his act is still built around raising hell onstage, Wetzel has realized that by sharing his own often unsettling stories, he's helping others feel less alone. "Whenever I see those people sing the songs back or I'm meeting them and [they're] telling me that what I told them saved their life — they were going to off themselves — that is really special," Wetzel says, his voice growing thick with emotion. "I didn't know that it was going to be that way, but now that it is, it's opened up my mind and my eyes ... This isn't about just taking care of the family anymore and setting everybody up. It's more about helping these folks live life. But they're helping me as well. Without them, I'd be out pouring concrete."

WHEN WETZEL BEGAN working on his current album, 2024's *9 Lives*, with Columbia senior vp of A&R Ben Maddahi, his relationship with the label was bruised. "We'd had a bumpy road in our first few album cycles with Columbia," Hurt says. "Some people left pretty consistently, and so by the time we got to Ben, there was kind of a sense of exhaustion on our [part] of just another A&R person being thrown our way."

That's not to say he hadn't achieved some level of success. After releasing three albums independently, Wetzel had put out two more through the label, including his cheekily titled Columbia debut, *Sellout*. That and his second album, 2022's *Hell Paso*, had together registered eight songs in the top 40 of *Billboard*'s Hot Rock & Alternative Songs chart, and the latter set reached No. 3 on Top Country Albums.

Columbia Records chairman/CEO Ron Perry asked Maddahi, who had worked with pop forces like Sia, Flo Rida and Charlie Puth, to meet with Wetzel. "Ron said something to the effect of, 'He sells tons of tickets and has a die-hard fan base ... We have really high hopes for him, but for some reason this hasn't worked so far,' " Maddahi says.

In June 2023, Maddahi flew to Fort Worth to see Wetzel perform a sold-out show at the 14,000-capacity Dickies Arena. "He had an entire arena of people shouting out every word from the nosebleeds to the front row," Maddahi recalls. "I came back [to the office] saying, 'This guy's a superstar.' "

Maddahi next flew to a show in Modesto, Calif., after which he and Wetzel had a heart-to-heart about the next album. "I wanted to slow things down," says Wetzel, who was listening to acts like ambient pop band Cigarettes After Sex. "I didn't want the super-edgy guitars, really loud drums."

Maddahi paired him with Gabe Simon, best known for co-producing Noah Kahan's *Stick Season*, and brought in several new co-writers, including Amy Allen, who won the 2024 Grammy Award for songwriter of the year and has written hits for Sabrina Carpenter and Harry Styles. It was during a writers camp with Allen and several other songwriters that the midtempo "High Road," about a tempestuous, dysfunctional relationship, was born.

He and Maddahi immediately thought of Jessie Murph, whom Wetzel had co-written with before, to join him on "High Road," and when she sent over a verse, "she killed it," Wetzel recalls. Columbia partnered with RECORDS Nashville to work the song to country radio, and its ascent began.

"He's very true to himself, and the songs he writes are exactly how he is, which is something I respect a lot," Murph says of Wetzel. "When I first heard 'High Road,' it felt very nostalgic to me. It felt like a song I could've heard when I was a kid, which I loved." To thank Murph, Wetzel bought her a pistol engraved with their names and the song's title that took three months to make. "I felt it was really Texas of me," he says proudly.

9 Lives' cover is a photograph of the double-wide trailer Wetzel lived in with his parents until he was 12. It's abandoned now and has fallen into disrepair, with broken slats on the wood steps and prickly bushes growing over the front porch. But inside, it's still full of books, video tapes, pots and pans, photos of his maternal and paternal great-grandparents and a CD of Miranda Lambert's 2007 album, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. Long gone are the posters that hung on Wetzel's bedroom walls of his first crush, teen pop star JoJo, and legendary slugger Mark McGwire. The last inhabitant he remembers was his uncle, who died several years ago. He's not sure who's living there now, if anyone. Standing inside, he surmises, "I think it's just a big ol' family of raccoons."

His father was a truck driver who shifted into construction when Wetzel was around 11, enabling the family to build a house on the land and move out of the trailer. His mother was a bank teller and a singer who often took Wetzel along to her gigs. He remembers, at age 5, grabbing his dad's old Hummingbird guitar that was down to two or three strings, "being in my Spider-Man underwear and feeling like I was playing to a million people. Looking back now, it's like a dream come true."

As a teen, he loved ’90s country, especially acts like the rough-hewn Kentucky Headhunters. But he also loved Nirvana, so much so that at 12 he asked for tickets to see the band for Christmas — and his parents had to break the news that not only was the band not together, but Kurt Cobain had been dead for a decade. “Nirvana had a huge impact,” he says. “I think that resonates with the way I play music — the big guitars, the catchy melodic hooks.”

The trailer sits on 100 acres of land that his great-grandfather bought in the 1930s. Wetzel’s family had gotten behind on the taxes and risked losing it until he bought and paid off the property in 2021. “This land means so much to me and my family. I never wanted anyone else to have it,” he says. While he doesn’t see living on it again himself, he plans to add some cows and, “hopefully, raising a family and having them come out here.”

That family is expanding soon: Wetzel and his girlfriend, Bailey Fisher, are expecting a baby girl in June, news they would announce on social media a few weeks after our interview. “We dated in college, and the last two years resparked everything,” Wetzel explains, then adds with typical candor, “It’s not some random chick I knocked up. I mean, we’re excited as hell. I’m scared as fuck … I’m getting older, I’m growing out of the college party lifestyle I’ve been on the last 10 years … They say there’s always a time to grow up and get your shit together, and my stuff is not together by no means at all, [but] it’s a lot different than what it was.”

> **“Koe is the epitome of an artist that is writing his own narrative … he’s writing the way he naturally feels.”**
>
> **—JELLY ROLL**

IN A CORNER OF KOE WETZEL’S Riot Room stands Dirty Sancho. The nonworking mechanical bull, named for the first Professional Bull Riders bull Wetzel bought (he now owns eight) is just one piece of his personal memorabilia decorating the 7,000-square-foot bar and nightclub Wetzel opened in Fort Worth’s Cultural District in 2023. “We’ve had to sew his head back on a couple of times,” he says of Dirty Sancho. “He’s seen some shit.”

Wetzel opened the Fort Worth bar, in part, so he would have a place to “drink and party and not worry about people putting me in jail at night,” he says, sitting on a stool in the Riot Room sipping tequila over ice. (A second Riot Room will open in Houston later this year, with hopes of more locations to follow.)

He’s not kidding around. His boisterous “February 28, 2016” from 2016’s *Noise Complaint* chronicles the night he was arrested for drunk driving, describing how in his inebriated state he just wants to find someone “sober enough to take me to Taco Bell.” The song has become an anthem for his fans, so much so that they’ve made Feb. 28 unofficial Koe Wetzel Day. On that day this year, he released a live album culled from 2024’s Damn Near Normal tour to thank his fans and dropped by the bar to play a few songs live, but he winces a little when he talks about the tune.

“Whenever we play it, I’m very grateful for what it’s done for us, but I’m kind of like, ‘Fuck,’ ” he says. He doesn’t hate the song, exactly — it’s just that he’s in a very different place at 32 than he was when he wrote it at 24. “I’m not that person as an artist anymore,” he says. “I’m not that person just having a good time.”

He has different regrets about “Drunk Driving” from 2020’s *Sellout*. In a catalog of dark songs, it’s one of Wetzel’s darkest: The narrator is driving drunk and trying to outrun his sins as he sings, “Everybody’s got to die somehow/Why not me right now.” It was Wetzel’s attempt to put himself in the mindset of some friends who had died in drunk driving accidents, and, looking back, he wishes he had named it something else. “The song’s not about condoning drunk driving or anything like that,” he says. “It’s a very emotional song.”

Then there’s *Hell Paso* track “Cabo,” which he swears is a true story about spending money on hookers and blow in the Mexican resort town. The crowd goes crazy when he plays it, he says, but he admits, “Me and Mama haven’t really talked about that one. I know it’s not her favorite by far.” (His mother and father do have plenty of other favorites and frequently come to his gigs: “I think they cry every damn show, her and my pops,” he says. “They’re crying, singing all the words. They’re proud of their baby boy.”)

The connection his fans have to some of Wetzel’s older, often brutally honest lyrics can lead to the misperception that he’s “some fucking hellion,” says Wetzel, who quit counting his number of tattoos at 36. “I feel like most of my music came from whenever I was going balls to the wall, and it’s just kind of not who I am anymore. I can still run it with the best of them, but I feel like they make their opinion of me before they get to meet me, and sometimes that sucks.”

Still, he admits that 1 p.m. Koe and 4 a.m. Koe are two different people. “That’s rock star Koe. He’s kind of a dick,” he says of the late-night version. “He’s a lot of fun, but he can get out of hand really fucking fast.”

He has somewhat curbed his drinking, including switching from whiskey to tequila. On his Damn Near Normal tour last year, he and some of his bandmates had a ritual: “An hour before the show, we’ll drink a bottle of tequila. If I start earlier, then the show will be shit, but if I start just after 5 p.m. and kind of drink a couple beers, bottle of tequila, then it’s like the right amount. You get onstage, everything’s smooth sailing, and it feels good.”

He has also changed his after-show routine, hopping straight on the bus as soon as the concert is over. “They took the after-parties away from me. I go shower on the bus, put my comfy clothes on, drink a couple beers, watch a movie, and I was in bed by midnight, 1 o’clock,” he says before admitting: “Honestly, I kind of enjoyed it. I sounded better than I ever had because I was taking care of myself a little bit more.”

KOE WETZEL’S LAKE HOUSE IS haunted by a ghost his two younger sisters have named Irene. There’s an underwater cemetery about 100 yards away in the lake, but no one knows if there’s any connection. Irene causes all kinds of mischief, Wetzel says, including throwing bottles off the bar and turning on the TV. “You’ll see her walking the balcony up here every now and then,” he says, describing an opaque apparition. “She kind of fucks with new people who stay here.” As if on cue, the closed front door suddenly swings wide open on its own.

Irene’s presence notwithstanding, “it’s a safe haven for me,” Wetzel says of this place on Pittsburg’s outskirts. With its spotty cell service, he can unplug, write and relax. “I bought it for us to make more memories,” he says of his friends and family, who come to grill and hang out on his five boats.

The walls on one side are lined with RIAA plaques — 12 of his songs have been certified gold or platinum — while the rest are covered with fish, bird and deer mounts, including deer killed by three generations of Wetzel men. But pride of place goes to an alligator skull on a sideboard; Wetzel killed the reptile with a buck knife during COVID-19 isolation in Matagorda Bay, Texas. “I got in the water, Steve Irwin’d him a little bit,” he says, sipping a Busch Light and pointing to a photo of him sitting astride the alligator. “Cool story to tell but my mom hates that story. She don’t like it when I do dumb shit. She worries about her baby way too much.”

There’s also a photo of him with a giant catfish he caught with his bare hands — known as noodling — in the lake. His biggest catch has been 62 pounds, which he and his buddies tagged and tossed back. Asked whether killing a bear with a bow and arrow or having a five-week No. 1 is more satisfying, Wetzel pauses to give the question considerable thought, then decides: “Adrenaline-wise, killing a bear with a bow. Accomplishment-wise, a five-week No. 1.”

For all his love of hunting and fishing, those subjects haven’t found their way into Wetzel’s music. “I feel like I was put here to write about relationships gone bad or going good. Real-world stuff, I guess,” he says. “Not saying that hunting is not. It’s a huge part of my life and I love it to death, but I just guess I haven’t figured out what I wanted to say about it yet.”

Yet as he begins working on new music, Wetzel, who will tour this year with HARDY and Morgan Wallen, as well as play Stagecoach and other festivals, says he’s increasingly finding that all his passions are intertwined.

“I feel like every time I’m [writing], it peels back a layer of who I am. I find something that I didn’t know was there,” he says. “Whenever you get the song completed, there’s no more holes in it. There’s nothing else you could do for that song. It’s like, ‘Man, this is insane. This is really cool.’ It’s almost like the noodling and the hunting for me: It’s something that I feel like I’ll never master, but it’s what keeps me coming back and back. It’s a cool deal.” b

Koe Wetzel performs at Billboard Presents THE STAGE at SXSW at Moody Amphitheater at Waterloo Park in Austin on March 13.

VALLEY BOYS

From left: Beto Acosta, Carlos Guerrero, Brian Ortega, Juan Javier Cantú, Julian Peña Jr. and Adelaido “Payo” Solís of Grupo Frontera photographed Dec. 20, 2024, in McAllen, Texas.

Having gone from playing quinceañeras to arenas, **GRUPO FRONTERA** is ready to take its brand of *música mexicana* global — and rep Texas' Rio Grande Valley all the way

BY PAULA MEJÍA

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JASMINE ARCHIE

ON AN OVERCAST WINTER afternoon in McAllen, Texas, all six members of Grupo Frontera are huddled around an oversize white box, staring gleefully at its contents. They peel back the tissue paper wrapping to reveal a present their stylist has gifted them just a few days shy of Christmas — a mound of plush Polo Ralph Lauren bathrobes, one for each member, with a brassy statement stitched onto the back: “Bitch, I got a Grammy!”

The members of the *norteño* and *cumbia* band — which won the Latin Grammy for best norteño album in 2024 — are standing inside their palatial Frontera HQ in McAllen, a home that they purchased last year. Built in the mid-2000s, the sprawling estate is a very particular vision of turn-of-the-21st-century luxury (see: the Tuscan kitchen replete with dark wood cabinetry). A minimalist home recording studio, where the band has laid down several tracks, sits just past the outdoor path wending around the pool and hot tub, in a yard expansive enough to park their fleet of tour buses.

Privacy and practicality alike spurred the band to centralize its operations here. When its star began rising about three years ago, after its cover of Colombian pop-rockers Morat’s “No Se Va” surged to life-altering virality on TikTok, Grupo Frontera would frequently record music in this South Texas enclave of the Rio Grande Valley where its members grew up and still reside — until some locals figured out where the group was recording and started showing up to the studio unannounced. “People would deadass just open the door, walk in and listen to whatever we were recording,” says frontman Adelaido “Payo” Solís in between sips of a briny *michelada*. “They would just wait for us to finish. Then we came out, we saw people, and we were like, ‘Hi?’ ”

Crucially, the house is decidedly “party-ful,” as Julian Peña Jr., the band’s affable percussionist and hype man, puts it. Grupo Frontera has held a tequila-fueled *carne asada* (a barbecue hang) or two here, including a baby shower for accordionist Juan Javier Cantú, who recently welcomed a daughter with his wife. The group — which also includes drummer Carlos Guerrero, bassist Brian Ortega and guitarist/*bajo quinto* player Beto Acosta — hopes to eventually open up the space for visiting collaborators and friends to crash there. But given that the house is still barely furnished, those plans are on hold for the moment. There aren’t many places to sit, save for a few folding chairs and tables here and there; only a handful of the home’s six bedrooms have mattresses in them propped up against walls. Tellingly, the sole piece of art inside is a framed photograph of the band mugging with superstar Bad Bunny — who collaborated with Grupo Frontera on its Billboard Hot 100 smash “un x100to,” peaking at No. 5 on the chart — splattered with globs of bright paint.

Interior decorating was admittedly low on the band’s priority list in 2024 — a year in which Grupo Frontera released its punchy set *Jugando a Que No Pasa Nada*, which reached the top 10 of the Top Latin Albums chart. An ambitious tour around the United States, Mexico and one date in Spain followed at amphitheaters and arenas, with shows featuring pyrotechnic flourishes and stretching about two hours. Somehow, Grupo Frontera also found time to release *Mala Mía*, a joint EP with fellow *música mexicana* stalwarts and collaborators Fuerza Regida, before the year ended. Then in late November, the group won its first-ever Latin Grammy for its 2023 debut album, *El Comienzo*.

In the three brief years it has been together, Grupo Frontera has transformed from a cohort playing covers at quinceañeras into a Mexican American boy band commanding some of the world’s largest stages — where it’s sometimes accompanied by legends its members looked up to while growing up, like Ramón Ayala, and other huge stars it has now recorded with, like Peso Pluma, Maluma and Nicki Nicole. By melding the norteño and cumbia of their childhoods with their micro-generation’s penchant for embracing genre swerves (most of the band members are young millennials, save for Solís, who’s about to turn 22), Grupo Frontera has helped usher in a new era of música mexicana.

“I feel that they’ve created a powerful movement and opened the path for more bands and for the public to reconnect with a genre that had been under the radar several years,” says Edgar Barrera, the Grammy- and Latin Grammy-winning songwriter who has written dozens of songs for the group and has been a mentor to it. Given that seven of the band’s singles and both of its studio albums have reached the top 10 on the Hot Latin Songs and Top Latin Albums charts, respectively, the approach seems to be working.

Grupo Frontera’s success story is all the more astonishing considering the unorthodox decisions its members have made along the way. For one thing, they have no interest in moving from the relatively quiet McAllen (population: roughly 150,000) to a Latin music metropolis like Miami or Los Angeles to be closer to potential opportunities. “We really take it to heart when they say, ‘Keep your feet on the ground,’ ” Guerrero says. “Us being humble is what’s going to take us farther.”

Instead, they’re bullish about staying close to home in the valley, a region that has made national headlines recently as one of the areas the Trump administration has targeted for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids. The Rio Grande Valley is also home to Intocable, one of the most successful norteño bands ever, and the region has historically produced talented musicians and even a handful of breakthrough stars — Bobby Pulido, Duelo and Freddy Fender among them — in spite of lacking the infrastructure that helps groups take the next big step.

In another unlikely turn, the band has released its music independently; indie label VHR Music put out its debut album, and the band self-released *Jugando*. But don’t mistake these decisions for ambivalence — the group is wary of staying in the same place, metaphorically speaking. “It’s not OK for you to be too comfortable and feel like what you’re doing right now is going to work out forever,” Solís says. And now Grupo Frontera finds itself at a new crossroads as it strategizes how to reach the next level of stardom — specifically, expanding its audience beyond the United States and Mexico, bringing its heart-tugging cumbias to new ears.

“We want to go someday to Japan,” Cantú says. “Any place we could play that’s different. Brazil is a goal we have … We want to put out our Mexican roots to the whole world.”

GRUPO FRONTERA’S ORIGIN STORY is bound up in TikTok’s inscrutable algorithm. In early 2022, one of its first singles, the ebullient “No Se Va,” became ubiquitous on the platform, debuting at No. 50 on Hot Latin Songs and eventually climbing to the top 10. The guys had just started playing music together during off-hours from their day jobs as car dealership finance managers and ranchers. They cobbled together early videos for a few hundred dollars and learned about the music industry by searching “how to” tutorials on YouTube. When the TikTok spotlight suddenly shone on them, they seized the moment. The act soon started working with Barrera, and in mere months, it had released another hit, then another. “If it wasn’t for TikTok when we released ‘No Se Va,’ it probably would have stayed in our hometown of the valley,” Solís says.

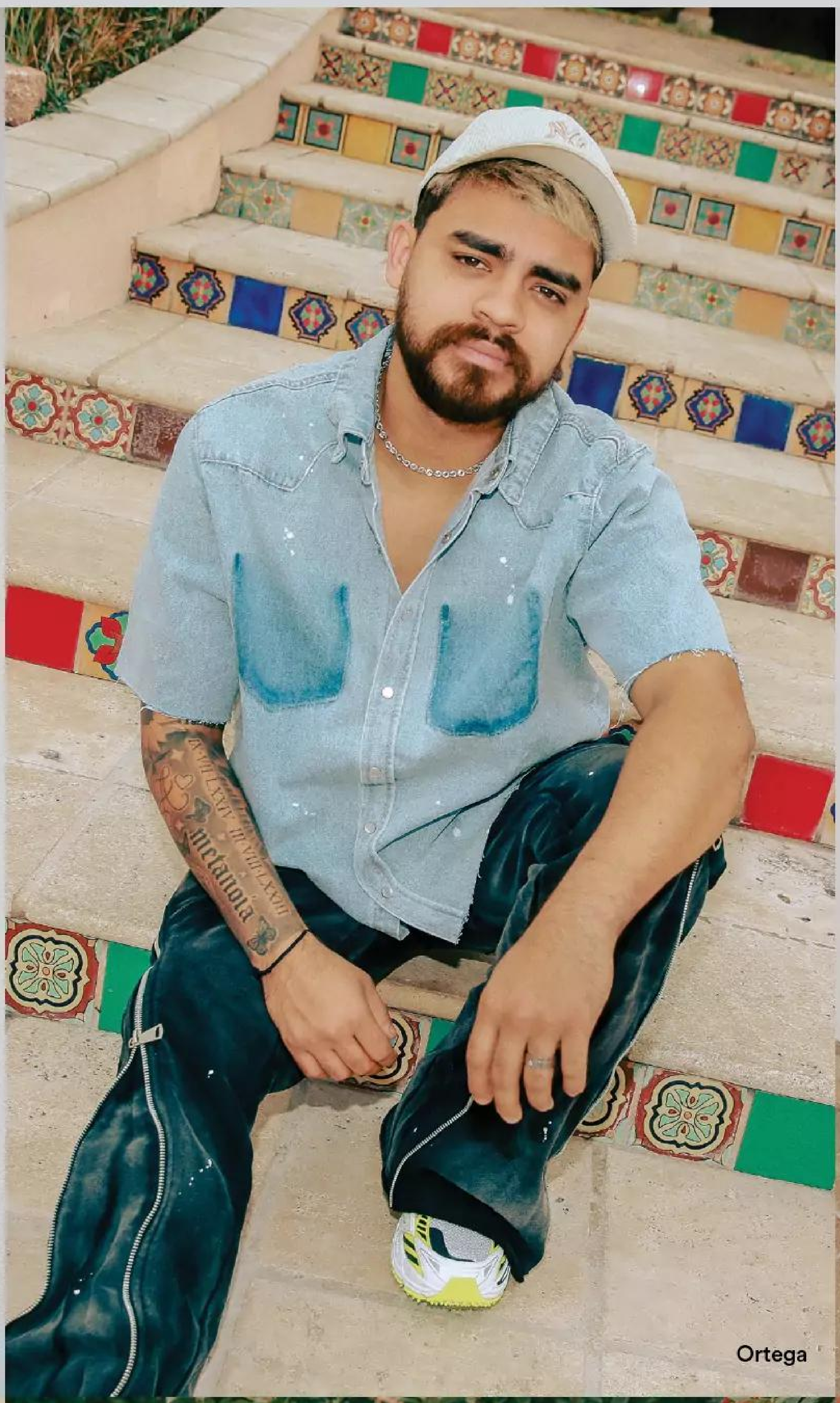
Barrera — who has written and produced for megastars including Shakira and Maluma — has a distinctive sensibility that has no doubt helped Grupo Frontera’s sound evolve over the years. His guidance was a boon in those early days, and he especially helped the act see a bigger picture. “We were thinking about, ‘How do we do the biggest wedding here in the valley?’ And [Barrera] goes, ‘Wedding? How can you do the biggest stadiums in the whole world? That’s how you have to think,’ ” Peña remembers. “And we’re like, ‘All right, let’s think that way.’ And then little by little, when we would release a song, we would do it thinking that this song was going to go viral, this song was going to help us out. And it would work.”

“We’re trying to become superstars. Something that 30 years from now, somebody’s going to look back [and say], ‘Dude, you remember Frontera?’ ” —JULIAN PEÑA JR.

It’s been practically three years to the day since Grupo Frontera first went nuclear on TikTok, back when talk of an outright ban wasn’t imminent. Yet some of the band members deleted their personal TikTok accounts recently and haven’t redownloaded the app since it returned online in mid-January following a brief ban. (The band’s professional TikTok is still active.) They don’t exactly miss it, personally. “I feel like I’m a new man,” Cantú says with a smile. These days, Solís has focused the attention he would have spent scrolling through TikTok on Splice,

STYLING BY OSCAR MONTES DE OCA. ON-SITE PRODUCTION BY CAMILO PARRA-MOLINA AT ONE+UNO.

Solís



Ortega

Peña

Acosta

Cantú

Guerrero

an app for sampling and creating songs. While Solís doesn't consider himself a gloomy person, he admittedly gravitates toward "melancholy, sad, depressing chords" while writing. "That's what inspires me, to be honest: those sadder chords."

While Solís' voice is his main instrument, he occasionally plays guitar, piano and accordion by ear. He'd like to get better at nailing down exactly what he wants to hear from the instrument he's playing so those sounds can aid him with songwriting — something he has been doing more of since last year's *Jugando* (where he was credited with co-writing the song "Ibiza," which is about wanting to give a lover anything their heart desires).

Though Barrera has written most of Grupo Frontera's songs so far, along with other writers like Ríos, the band feared becoming complacent by always yielding those creative duties to someone else. "We were comfortable with the fact that [Barrera] would send us a song and that's it," Solís says. "But at a certain point, we felt like we weren't working for it." The group started inviting other songwriters into the mix, and Solís began chipping in more after a generative writing camp with Barrera.

The band sees taking calculated sonic risks as pivotal to its next phase. In late January, for instance, Grupo Frontera hopped on a song with Spanish icon Alejandro Sanz, "Hoy no me siento bien," that marked two milestones: It was the group's first-ever salsa tune and its farthest-afield collaborator to date. "I'm not too sure if a bajo quinto has ever played salsa before, but Beto was trying his best," Solís jokes. Unlike the band's usual fare, the song doesn't address being in (or out of) love, either. "But I love the message," Solís says. "It's like, 'Today, I don't feel OK and that's OK.' "

"Yeah, like feeling bad is OK, too," Cantú interjects. "That's badass."

On its recent collaborative EP with Fuerza Regida, Grupo Frontera moved in yet another direction: trying *corridos* imbued with a Tejano bent, along with its cumbias. While these projects have been well-received commercial successes, the prospect of potentially not hitting the mark, and perhaps even failing, doesn't seem to deter the act. "That's what we want to do — to tell the world that Frontera can collaborate with different artists and that we could also make different styles of music," Cantú says. "That's our goal, most likely, for this year. Not to get away from cumbia or norteño — that's our base. But also like, 'Hey, we could also play and sing this.' "

> "They've created a powerful movement and opened the path for more bands and for the public to reconnect with a genre that had been under the radar several years."
>
> —EDGAR BARRERA

THE MORNING AFTER catching a transatlantic flight from Spain, the members of Grupo Frontera arrive at a local sports club in McAllen with rackets in tow. They're here to play *padel*, a sport resembling tennis and squash, that they got hooked on thanks to its low chance of injury. As they arrive one by one, the guys seem in good spirits if a bit bleary-eyed. They begin warming up by bouncing balls against glass walls surrounding the court. Acosta arrives last, strolling in with a sheepish grin. "The tardy one," the band's publicist says with an eye roll. "You can put that in the article."

Since only four players can be on the court at any given time, the men rotate sets. Acosta rolls up one pant leg to get his head in the game, then forcefully serves the yellow ball. It lands with a thwack on the court's blue turf, and Cantú bursts out singing the keyboard riff from "The Final Countdown." Shit-talking abounds. Guerrero, who suffered an injury after missing the last step of some stairs, is moving with some hesitation — but after playing a few focused rounds, he and Acosta win the impromptu tournament.

While they might be opponents on the court at this moment, they tend to operate as a single organism in the band's day-to-day decision-making. They use a democratic process and any arguments are cleared up directly: "When one person is wrong, the rest of the group notices it and they just tell them straight up," Solís says.

Solís sees a through line between the band's padel habit and the heightened energy it unleashed on last year's Live Nation-promoted *Jugando* tour. In 2023, when it first started touring extensively, Solís admits that he would tend to stay in the same spot while singing onstage. "Then this year, I would, like, run around and jump across the stage and stuff." The guys start chortling, talking over one another as they consider how they might elevate their stage presence in 2025: "Backflips! Shirtless concerts! Splits!"

Should the band realize its stadium dreams, the group's penchant for showmanship will likely still need to be amped up further. "The show needs an upgrade on the technical and musical sides," explains Raymond Acosta, the director of talent management at Habibi who works with the band there. (The band has been signed to the management division of Rimas Entertainment since 2023.) "The larger space demands a greater offering to fans. It has to be a unique experience where fans feel part of something bigger than just a show. It's a challenge to connect with every single person in that stadium." But as Acosta sees it, a band like Grupo Frontera is up for that challenge: The act "can attract all types of crowds, which makes a significant difference."

For the moment, Grupo Frontera is embarking on something else it has never done before: taking a monthlong break to recalibrate from its breakneck touring schedule, right before delving into writing new music. The last item on its calendar in December involves distributing free holiday toys for a block party at Edinburg, Texas' Bert Ogden Arena, where it held a spur-of-the-moment free performance for the community.

Grupo Frontera is cognizant of how it represents the Rio Grande Valley both out on the road and at home. And while it has always eschewed any talk of politics, it has inherently become part of any discussion of where the band comes from, as the U.S.-Mexico border is now a flash point for discussions about immigration, xenophobia and racism. When I ask in December if they've been feeling the reverberations of this particular political moment — with the vocally anti-immigrant Trump administration then about to enter the White House —

From left: Acosta, Peña, Cantú, Guerrero, Ortega and Solís.

and if their fans approach them wanting to talk about politics, the band deflects. "I mean, our group name, Grupo Frontera, I think it feels natural for people to be like, 'You're from the border,' stuff like that," Guerrero says. "We always try to keep that private." Peña chimes in, saying that they strive to "talk about music, that's it." (Their publicist shuts down any further discussion of the topic.)

But recently, the band had to answer for a political controversy of its own, when a video of Solís' grandmother (known as "La Abuela Frontera" online) dancing to "Y.M.C.A.," a song that Trump played frequently on the campaign trail, circulated online. Coupled with a now-deleted TikTok video of the band jamming to the same song, it prompted outrage from fans who perceived it as the group celebrating Trump's election win. The backlash has since led to boycotts and a petition calling for Grupo Frontera to be taken off the lineup for Sueños, a Chicago musical festival where it's slated to perform in May.

In response, the band wrote in a statement that "Grupo Frontera has NO affiliation nor alliance with any political party that's against immigrants and the Latino community. Like many of you, our families and [group] members have fought and struggled for a better future, and we will always take our people's side, defending our roots and values. It's important you know that the opinions of our friends and family don't represent Grupo Frontera. We are immigrants, we are from the border, and Grupo Frontera will always be by and for the people." The band also posted a video in late February stating that the "Y.M.C.A." video had been part of a routine it had on its last tour, where it danced to a different song before each show; in it, Acosta lamented how a swirl of "fake news" had been "putting us against our own people."

As they see it, their main obligation is to elevate the valley in the eyes of the world, especially the musicians who hail from their same stomping grounds. "There's a lot of talent," Guerrero says of musicians in the valley. "Better than us," Acosta adds. To them, what prevents musicians from making a successful living in music here is a lack of recording studios — but they want to leave behind a "trail for everybody to do it," Cantú says. That might eventually involve having bands record at their own studio. As the guys see it, it's not so much that they "made it" out of the valley, but rather that they're "trying to make the valley grow," as Solís puts it.

It was that same kind of support that first convinced Grupo Frontera to stay independent, after hearing cautionary tales from Acosta's brother and other local musicians who had signed unfavorable record deals. Since then, it has made as much of an effort to learn the back end of the music business as it does fine-tuning chord progressions, often seeking Barrera's counsel. Even after it was first approached by a few big labels, the band had "a gut feeling that it was not the right choice at the time," Cantú says, a smile growing across his face. "And it worked out pretty good."

The members believe these incremental steps, along with their unconventional approach, will take them where they eventually plan to be. "We're trying to become superstars," Peña says. "Something that 30 years from now, somebody's going to look back [and say], 'Dude, you remember Frontera?' "

A while back, Peña recalls, someone in Grupo Frontera (he doesn't remember who) mentioned wanting to become like AC/DC or Queen — a timeless band steeped in mythos. At first, Peña scoffed at the idea. "I remember saying, 'Dude, shut up. Like, what the hell?' " he says. "And now I think about it like, 'Why not?' I mean, why can't we be that?" b

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Grupo Frontera will perform at Billboard Presents THE STAGE at SXSW at Moody Ampitheater at Waterloo Park in Austin on March 14.

Summit photographed Feb. 4
at Riverset Studios in Miami.

Styling by Brianna Dooley
CUBEL x The Room jacket, Lost & Found
T-shirt, Tercero Jewelry rings.

JOHN SUMMIT HASN'T YET PEAKED

The self-described hustler has pulled off one of dance music's rarest feats: becoming a hard-ticket juggernaut with a signature sound, big-ass hits and intergenerational appeal

BY KATIE BAIN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY YSA PÉREZ

THE SHOW WAS, unequivocally, going off.

In time with the beat, columns of fire blasted from a complicated and expensive-looking stage setup as a litany of dance hits blasted through the speakers of Los Angeles' Kia Forum, where more than 15,000 people and their approximately 30,000 ears were gathered to hear the music.

Drunk girls traded compliments in line for the bathroom while staffers trying to prevent fire hazards cajoled people to dance in their seats instead of the aisles. It was a proper arena rager, a de facto badge of success for any artist, but particularly so in the world of dance music.

At the center of it all, John Summit — tanned, smiling, his shirt unbuttoned to a chest level that suggested a regular workout routine — threw up heart hands while manning the cockpit of CDJs before him. It was Nov. 16, 2024, the final evening of the producer's sold-out three-night run at the Forum, shows executed by a 130-person team working overtime. It was just one of the very big moments of Summit's biggest year to date, and while the set wasn't even done yet, in his mind it was already over.

"I got too comfortable by the end," he reflects three months later, "and I was like, 'This show is done. This is the last one.' And not because it wasn't great. I think it was excellent. But I don't want to write the same movie twice."

This sentiment embodies three essential truths about Summit. First and most obviously, that the 30-year-old Illinois native has accomplished quite a lot since emerging from the froth of internet buzz over the last five years. Second, that Summit possesses an almost strangely intense drive, a kind of stubborn single-mindedness that propels him forward even when the thing he has spent a year working on is still happening around him. And third: Summit's tendency to most often describe his life not in terms of music but cinema. His big shows and capital B bangers are, for example, "big-budget projects, like Marvel," whereas his smaller, clubbier sets "are A24," he says, referencing the lauded indie studio. He compares the beginning of his sold-out Madison Square Garden show last summer to an action film, calling the pyro-heavy moment "basically me blowing up onstage. It was very Michael Bay-esque."

Surveying the public-facing landscape of Summit's life helps to explain his tendency to process it all in leading-man terms. Through an alchemy of talent, will, hard work and smart decision-making, Summit and his team have pulled off one of dance music's rarest feats: becoming a hard-ticket juggernaut with a signature sound, big-ass hits and intergenerational appeal.

At the Garden, says Wasserman's Daisy Hoffman, who represents Summit alongside Ben Shprits, "older adult fans" intermingled with younger ones. "I have 35-year-old friends with kids who are doing a girls' trip to Vail [Colo.] for his show there, while my 25-year-old sister is following his every move on TikTok."

A DJ achieving this kind of broad appeal is, today, a bit like spotting a snow leopard in the wild. "It's very rare," Shprits says. "It is extremely rare."

But it's also not a fluke: Summit is a confident and adorable hustler with high standards and an intense Midwestern work ethic. "I'm delusional," he says on a recent balmy Wednesday afternoon in Miami, where he moved to in 2020 to try and make it as a DJ. "I thought the first track I ever made was amazing."

Since his first release in 2017, he has steadily attracted other believers, with his sprawling business now populated by managers, agents, accountants, label operators, radio pluggers, marketers, production designers, social media experts and the videographer who silently and ceaselessly captures footage as Summit shows me around Miami, a city where he has not only made it, but where he now avoids "super-glamorous spots where I feel like people are just staring at me the whole time."

Dance superstardom has changed him. Whereas his social channels used to be plastered with drunken shenanigans, Summit now posts a lot about exercising. Hours before we meet, he shares an image of a yoga mat on the balcony of the waterfront condo he bought two years ago. While we chat, he talks about his need for consistent sleep (he tucks in at midnight and wakes up at seven) and more than once references his "personal growth journey." But while Summit is Evolving with a capital E, his tenacity remains unaltered. After releasing his debut album, *Comfort in Chaos*, last July, he's already at work on its follow-up. This summer, he'll also headline festivals including Movement, Lightning in a Bottle and Bonnaroo; launch an Ibiza residency; and play shows in Australia, Europe and beyond.

"I'm hustling harder than I've ever hustled before," he says, his Chicago accent strong. "The shows are only getting bigger and not just bigger, but better. The team is growing. My record label is growing. I'm working on a second album already, whereas I think most dance artists, especially house artists, don't even do albums. Every year is crazier and crazier. It would be stupid to slow down when it's snowballing."

OFY top, Lost & Found pants, Rick Owens shoes, Tercero Jewelry necklace and rings.

AND YET IT ALL occasionally leaves his head spinning. For example, Summit compares spending the holidays in his native Naperville, Ill., to the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, when Frodo Baggins returns to the Shire after risking life and limb to destroy the One Ring and finds that while his idyllic homeland is the same as when he left it, he — fundamentally transformed by his quest — is not. "I've had the craziest life, toured the whole world, had many adventures and late nights, got into some bad situations," Summit says. "Then I come back home and everything is the exact same."

One can see how opening Christmas presents in your parents' living room in the suburbs might seem surreal after playing for hundreds of thousands of people across multiple continents. But it was in Naperville and nearby Chicago where Summit — then a "kind of nerdy runner" born John Schuster — was first exposed to dance music. It happened while seeing deadmau5 at Lollapalooza in 2011, an experience Summit, then 16, has equated to a sort of spiritual awakening. His subsequent journeys through SoundCloud were exacerbated by a high school love interest. "At first, I was just making music to impress my girlfriend at the time," he says. "She liked all these DJs, and I was like, 'I can fucking do this.' "

Summit got serious about DJ'ing and producing while a student at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. By 2017, he had graduated with a master's degree in accounting and was working at Ernst & Young while making music in his off-hours. (And, he admits, often during work hours, too.) He sent "dozens of demos" to a flurry of labels, focusing on esteemed U.K. imprints like Toolroom and Defected Records, which specialize in the house and tech house styles he was making.

"It's no different than applying for 100 jobs when you're out of college," Summit says matter-of-factly of sending out demos. Eventually, a few small labels replied with feedback on how he could improve, and by 2018, they had signed a few of his tracks. By this time, Summit was in touch with a young manager named Holt Harmon, who was working with Summit on the release of a track he had made with an artist Harmon was then working with. The pair clicked.

"I had a call with Holt about, like, 'How is this getting distributed? What's the marketing strategy?' I went very exec mode on him," Summit says. "I think he was like, 'Oh, this kid's not just good at music. He gets it and he's not lazy.' I thought the same about him."

Summit became the third artist signed to Metatone, the management company Harmon co-founded alongside Parker Cohen in 2018. But as things picked up for Summit, the pandemic hit. By now, Summit had been fired from Ernst & Young and was back living with his parents. But what might have seemed like a roadblock became something else.

"People saw the pandemic as a time to take their foot off the gas," Shprits says. "And here you've got a 20-something guy on the verge of taking the next step in his career who saw it as an opportunity to do the opposite."

In the basement, Summit made music and was extremely online, posting production tutorials, doing livestreams and winning people over with what Shprits calls his "unfiltered" personality. ("I would pay $500 to slap a warm bag of wine at a music festival right now," Summit tweeted in May 2020, the deep days of the pandemic.) By the end of 2020, he had gone from livestreaming from Naperville to playing a b2b set with Gorgon City broadcast from a Chicago rooftop, racking up millions of views and likes along the way with this, as well as other self-deprecating, unapologetic and funny content. You couldn't help but root for the guy.

Around this time, Summit moved to America's dance music capital, Miami, with the goal of playing an extended set at the influential nightclub Space. "People didn't see me as a serious DJ," he says. "They saw me as someone who might have blown up on TikTok or something. Then I was doing these eight- to 10-hour sets of pretty underground music, not even playing a big vocal record until four or five hours in, kind of just proving like, 'Yeah, I'm a fucking DJ.' That was my version of taking on a very serious role."

The method acting worked. When clubs reopened across the United States, Summit was suddenly selling out 500-capacity rooms in far-flung cities like Tempe, Ariz., often in seconds. He and his team focused on playing as much as they could, wherever they could, and venues eventually got bigger as the social media reach grew. His single and EP releases were largely house and tech house tracks, with his output helping propel the latter subgenre to increasingly bigger audiences, particularly as Summit experimented with bigger and more vocal-forward records, the kind that typically have maximum crossover potential.

His watershed moment came when he released "Where You Are," a collaboration with power-lunged British singer-songwriter Hayla, in March 2023. "Before putting it out, I was like, 'This is going to fuck up my entire career because this is a headliner, main-stage song,' " he

> **"I'm hustling harder than I've ever hustled before … Every year is crazier and crazier. It would be stupid to slow down when it's snowballing."**
>
> **— SUMMIT**

says. "Very few DJs had become successful in the pop lane. It was like, 'Am I ready for this challenge?' Then I was like, 'Fuck it. Let's do it.' "

"Where You Are" spent 26 weeks on *Billboard*'s Hot Dance/Electronic Songs chart; now has 298.7 million on-demand official global streams, according to Luminate; and was selected as a favorite song of 2023 by another Chicagoland resident, Barack Obama. By December 2023, Summit sold out Los Angeles' BMO Stadium, moving 21,700 tickets and grossing $1.7 million, according to Billboard Boxscore.

"Where You Are" and other subsequent belters from *Comfort in Chaos* have, along with Summit's general presence in the scene, agitated the dance world's perpetual push-pull between the commercial and underground, a turf war that has long found artists wanting to play the biggest shows and have the biggest hits without losing the credibility and cool factor of dance's less overtly capitalist sectors. But Summit wants to do both.

"John's been very vocal about wanting to bring the underground to a large scale while bringing a production level that no one's ever seen with this style of music," Shprits says. "That's always been the guiding light."

But even if you're playing music with underground origins, it's not necessarily accurate to call yourself an underground artist while playing from atop a laser-shooting platform at the center of a sold-out arena. This is why Summit created Experts Only, the name of both the label on which he, in partnership with Darkroom Records, releases his own and other artists' music and a party series where he plays lesser-known music ("I feel like I have to be very on the forefront with the records," he says) for smaller crowds in tighter spaces.

"I look at John Summit and Experts Only as two different things," Summit says. "John Summit is this grand display, a huge-budget production that shows my art and music from the album, whereas Experts Only is a party brand where me and DJ [friends] do cooler underground cuts … You hear so many artists who blew up that are like, 'I hate playing my big song every night.' They wish they could play more experimental stuff. I'm getting the best of both worlds."

Doing both has broadened Summit's appeal. The underground thing, Shprits says, is "generally attractive to an older demographic that's experienced with electronic music. Then he has this amazing ability to craft songs that attract your high school and college demographic. Take all of that and then combine it with the personality, the packaging and the A&R'ing from the management and label side, it's like the perfect big bang."

And yet, Summit questions what the "hipster snob" John Schuster might think of it all. He recalls firing off "hypercritical" tweets at main-stage dance giants back in the EDM era; he preferred the heady vibes of Michigan's beloved dance/jam festival Electric Forest and deep cuts like Shiba San's 2014 house classic, "Okay." "Now I'm here in those same shoes getting as much shit talked about me. I think that's maybe why I can get through it without getting too offended, because that was me doing the shit-talking."

But when you read most every social media comment, as Summit says he does, the ability to laugh off insults is helped by what he calls "a good supporting cast." (He screenshots particularly egregious remarks and sends them to the inner circle for diffusion.) Taking a team approach to his career "is way less lonely," with every person on the team not only bringing "a Swiss Army knife" of abilities, but together creating a perpetual group hang that's the antidote to the cycle of loneliness, depression and addiction that has historically plagued dance artists.

Still, he *is* John Summit of the John Summit project, and his vision is specific. Here in Miami, he has ideas for how he wants to be photographed and filmed. He likes a lot of prep and knowing what the plan is. He's agreeable and charming. You could also call him bossy — or just someone who knows what he wants.

"For better or for worse, I challenge people around me as much as possible to be at their greatest," he says. "I'm ever-evolving, and everyone has to be ever-evolving around me." Cohen says that among the team, Summit is often referred as "the third manager." Shprits acknowledges that "at many times, John has challenged us to understand where he was going with this and to meet him."

Summit isn't quite sure where the drive comes from. "I was fortunate to have a very normal upbringing," he says, and his parents (his father is a commercial airline pilot and his mother a real estate agent) "are like, 'You're doing great. You don't have to keep pushing.' I don't come from an incredibly successful artistic family. There's no mounting pressure." At least, not from outside sources.

"This is one of the most competitive industries in the world," he continues. "I can't let off the gas because the second I do, someone else is going to steam ahead. I'm going to try my best and try to be the best. Otherwise, what's the point?"

SO, FOR THE foreseeable future, Summit shall keep gunning it. After *Comfort in Chaos* hit No. 39 on the Billboard 200, he's now at work on a follow-up album that he wants to be "bigger and better." While he didn't get any 2025 Grammy nominations after campaigning for them, he says that just gives him "something to strive for." And while dance music isn't even a genre that necessitates albums, Summit sees them as meaningful: "I look at some of the greatest artists over the last generations, where album after album, they try to outdo themselves, reinvent themselves." He takes cues not only from musicians but high-achieving athletes and, naturally, actors, calling Timothée Chalamet's recent run "fucking incredible" and particularly inspiring.

For the next album, he's interested in releasing a short movie alongside it. A recent rewatch of the 2014 film *Whiplash* inspired him to buy a drum kit and, maybe, play percussion on some of his new music. While he "shot my shot" with pop stars like Charli xcx and Dua Lipa by tweeting at them asking to work together (no collaborations have resulted), he says working with this type of artist "is not needed in my career," given the strong roster of vocalists with "raw talent" like Hayla, Julia Church and more that he has surrounded himself with. He regularly brings out these vocalists during big shows and "fucking loves it" when they get a huge crowd reaction.

Plus, having tried working with a few pop stars, he finds bumping into their limited schedules "very diva-like. And as a diva myself," he says with a laugh, "there's only room for one of us."

As writing gets underway, he's also finding that he has grown up a bit since the days when his tagline was "My life is a bender." ("My bender era walked so brat could run," he tweets while we have lunch; the sentiment gets 2,500 likes before the plates are cleared.) *Comfort in Chaos* explored deeper topics than partying, and he says making it was a huge leap in his maturation. A song like his 2022 "In Chicago" (sample lyric: "I'm drunk, I'm high and I'm in Chicago") "is basically like LMFAO," he says. "It's like my 'Party Rock [Anthem].' " *Comfort in Chaos*, on the other hand, was largely about love and longing. When asked about this subject matter, he acknowledges that "I'm a lover boy" but demurs when asked to expand, saying only, "I tell it through the music, not in interviews." (If anyone wants to read the tea leaves, the lyrics of Summit's most recent song, the moody indie dance track "Focus," inquire, "How'd we get so lost inside of this room?/Watching you turn into someone I never knew/I remember love, but it's slipping out of view.")

While Summit works out these big feelings in his new music, he'll also spend the rest of 2025 headlining major U.S. festivals and touring the world; he and his team are particularly focused on international expansion this year. Outside of Ibiza, he says "there's really no money" in international shows, but adds that revenue isn't the point: "I'm young and hungry, and I want to showcase my art with the world."

It's all a wild ride, a summer popcorn blockbuster, a journey to Mordor and back. It's the kind of stuff Summit sometimes thinks about after the workday ends, when "I take an edible and think, 'Holy shit, this world is crazy.' But then I wake up in the morning, snap out of it and get back to it."

John Summit performs at Billboard Presents THE STAGE at SXSW at Moody Amphitheater at Waterloo Park in Austin on March 15.

GROOMING BY NATASHA SMEE AT CREATIVE MANAGEMENT. ON-SITE PRODUCTION BY DANIELA MOLINA AT OUT OF SERVICE.

OFY top and T-shirt, Lost & Found x Levi's pants, Rick Owens x Dr. Martens shoes, Tercero Jewelry rings.

billboard

ACADEMY
OF COUNTRY MUSIC

2025

60TH ACM AWARDS
PROGRAM GUIDE

The Academy of Country Music is a leading association for the country music industry that serves as a powerful advocate for country fans, artists and all facets of the business, as well as provides philanthropic aid through charitable partner ACM Lifting Lives. 2025 is a landmark year for the academy as it celebrates the 60th ACM Awards, which will be hosted by entertainment icon Reba McEntire. The May 8 awards return to the world headquarters of the Dallas Cowboys in Frisco, Texas, for a third consecutive year and stream live to a global audience on Prime Video.

Get your brand in front of 5,000-plus academy members, voters and music industry professionals in the ACM Awards program guide, produced by *Billboard.*
The guide will be distributed at the ceremony at the culmination of ACM Awards Week.

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ISSUE DATE 5/8 | AD CLOSE 4/3 | MATERIALS DUE 4/8

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2025 BRANDING POWER PLAYERS

Meet today's most music-focused brand leaders betting on artists, songs, tours and festivals to help them grow their core business — and the top deal-makers guiding their investments

WILL BRANDS SLOW THEIR RECORD SPENDING?

Partnerships with artists “are bigger than they have ever been because they give companies the ability to break through the noise,” says MAC Consulting’s Marcie Allen

BY STEVE KNOPPER

MUSIC BRANDING” DOES NOT INVOLVE stamping horses with band logos (at least not yet). But it does apply to just about anything else in which a commercial entity — from Taco Bell to JPMorganChase — partners with an artist or music company.

Which is why, at the beginning of last year’s Brat Summer, Charli xcx appeared as a 3D hologram activated by White Claw drinkers who aimed their phones at a product logo; why Nike spent in the low seven figures to license Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” for a Super Bowl LIX commercial; why Will Ferrell sang a PayPal jingle set to Fleetwood Mac’s “Everywhere”; and why Pinterest set up Coachella “manifest stations” filled with beauty products curated by singer Victoria Monét.

“It can be a tour sponsorship, a social media campaign, a tie-in with a brand’s philanthropic endeavor,” says Marcie Allen, president of MAC Consulting, who has been connecting artists with brands for 30 years and was one of 15 music industry experts who helped *Billboard* compile its first Branding Power Players list since 2019. “Brand partnerships are bigger than they have ever been because they give companies the ability to break through the noise.”

There are no metrics that quantify the overall music-branding market, because it’s so multifaceted — from the multimillion-dollar advertising synch business to singer-songwriter RAYE performing intimate concerts at Hilton hotel rooms, footage of which appeared in commercials and social media posts. That said, a hint of its scale can be found in the financial filings of the industry’s largest concert promoter, Live Nation, whose worldwide sponsorship revenue has grown from $590.3 million in 2019 to $1.2 billion in 2024. (Advertising and sponsorship amounted to just over 5% of Live Nation’s total revenue last year.)

“We’re seeing brands spending more in music than ever before,” says Russell Wallach, the promoter’s global president of media and sponsorship. He adds that Live Nation research shows 80% of its customers are “interested” in participating with brands at live events. “What brands are doing from an experiential standpoint has been significantly elevated over the last few years.”

Post-pandemic, according to Allen, brands have returned aggressively to the live space — like T-Mobile sponsoring this summer’s Post Malone-Jelly Roll tour.

The synch business, too, has more than rebounded since the pandemic: Global revenue amounted to $400 million in 2020, mostly due to production shutdowns, but it hit $632 million in 2023, according to IFPI. That’s an increase of 58%, from 0.4% of global recording-industry revenue in 2020 to 2.2%. (These numbers don’t include publishing, but they do include film/TV synchs in addition to advertising.) For this year’s Super Bowl, licensed songs cost between $400,000 and $2.5 million on the publishing side alone, music industry sources say, not counting the separate fees for licensing master recordings. According to Brian Monaco, Sony Music Publishing’s president/global chief marketing officer, 50% of this year’s Super Bowl ads, which cost brands a reported $7 million to $8 million apiece, employed synchs.

In the streaming era, brands and music companies are more efficient than ever in using data to align artists’ fan bases with companies’ target demographics, says Rich Yaffa, Universal Music Group’s executive vp of global brands: “When we partner with a brand, our goal is to make fans of our artists fans of their brands.”

Stephanie Miles, Wasserman Music’s head of music brand partnerships, says brands recently have become more willing to work on elaborate activations with artists. One act she declines to name spent months negotiating a fashion shoot and a live event to ensure both artist and brand emphasized the same regional market. “The days of receiving an opportunity that has been completely conceptualized by a brand, and the artist taking it as is, are long gone,” she says.

“Deals are definitely becoming more complicated and sophisticated,” adds Andrew Klein, managing director of AEG’s global partnerships. “It used to be [when] Coca-Cola’s coming out with a new product, [it would] just hand out the can [at concerts] and do a sampling program. They’re now trying to get a lot more return on investment. Yes, they want to sponsor the tour, but they also want to use the music for that artist in a campaign, use [their] name and likeness or tap into their social media.”

Will the good times in music branding continue? It’s hard to say, given President Donald Trump’s unsettling of the economy with layoffs, deportations, tariffs and threats of tariffs in the first weeks of his administration. “We’re starting to see a bit of a spend slowdown,” says Toni Wallace, partner and head of music brand strategy and partnerships at UTA. “There’s no question the demand and opportunity is there; it’s just ‘Let’s see how this first quarter goes.’ ”

It wasn’t long ago that artists, fearing claims of “selling out,” avoided collaborations with major corporations: In the late ’80s, after Pepsi landed Michael Jackson, Madonna and David Bowie in commercials and Whitney Houston sang a Diet Coke jingle, Neil Young responded with the scathing “This Note’s for You”: “Ain’t singing for Pepsi/Ain’t singing for Coke/I don’t sing for nobody/Makes me look like a joke.”

But things have changed: In 1999, Sting refashioned his “Desert Rose” music video into a Jaguar commercial; Bob Dylan licensed “Love Sick” to a Victoria’s Secret spot in 2004; an instrumental portion of Vampire Weekend’s 2019 “Harmony Hall” — an upbeat-sounding tune that nevertheless is about antisemitism — was used in a Choice Hotels TV plug; and last year, Megan Thee Stallion’s colorful 2024 Amazon Music ad included the original track “It’s Prime Day.”

“You had rockers who never wanted to be seen associated with anything: ‘It’s too commercialized,’ ” says Jeff Straughn, Primary Wave’s senior partner/chief brand officer. “Today, it’s ‘How can I sell it?’ ”

TAMI HURWITZ

Global vp of marketing and growth

AMAZON MUSIC

Amazon’s splashiest 2024 music-branding moment was a July commercial starring Megan Thee Stallion, who showed her contractual support for Prime Day with an original track titled “It’s Prime Day” (available on Amazon Music, of course). The online retailer also released exclusive merchandise for her arena tour and promoted her *MEGAN* album. “With Amazon’s reach and diverse businesses, we are unique in our ability to help artists grow their own brand,” Hurwitz says. After *Thursday Night Football*, for example, the streaming service aired concert series *Amazon Music Live*, with performances by Jelly Roll, Halsey, Gunna, TWICE and others. The company also produced several festival livestreams, including Vive Latino in Mexico City last March and Primavera Sound in Barcelona in May.

BESS SPAETH

Executive vp of global brand management and experiences

SHIZ SUZUKI

Vp of global brand sponsorships and experiential marketing

AMERICAN EXPRESS

Suzuki, an Amex and AT&T branding vet who has partnered with AEG, Coachella and artists over the years, spent much of 2024 teaming with Billie Eilish and FINNEAS on merch pop-ups, album-listening sessions, exclusive video content showing how the duo came up with “Birds of a Feather” and ticket presales for the *Hit Me Hard and Soft* tour. “Partnering with an artist in multiple ways across their music cycle lets us make fans’ experience that much better when they’re with Amex,” Suzuki says. The company also sponsored international shows and a Keith Urban-Train double bill at a PGA West golf tournament in La Quinta, Calif., in January. Amex is trying to reach “the next generation of music fans,” Spaeth says, “in places where their passion for music intersects, like sports.”

RONNIE YOKED

Head of experiential marketing

ANHEUSER-BUSCH

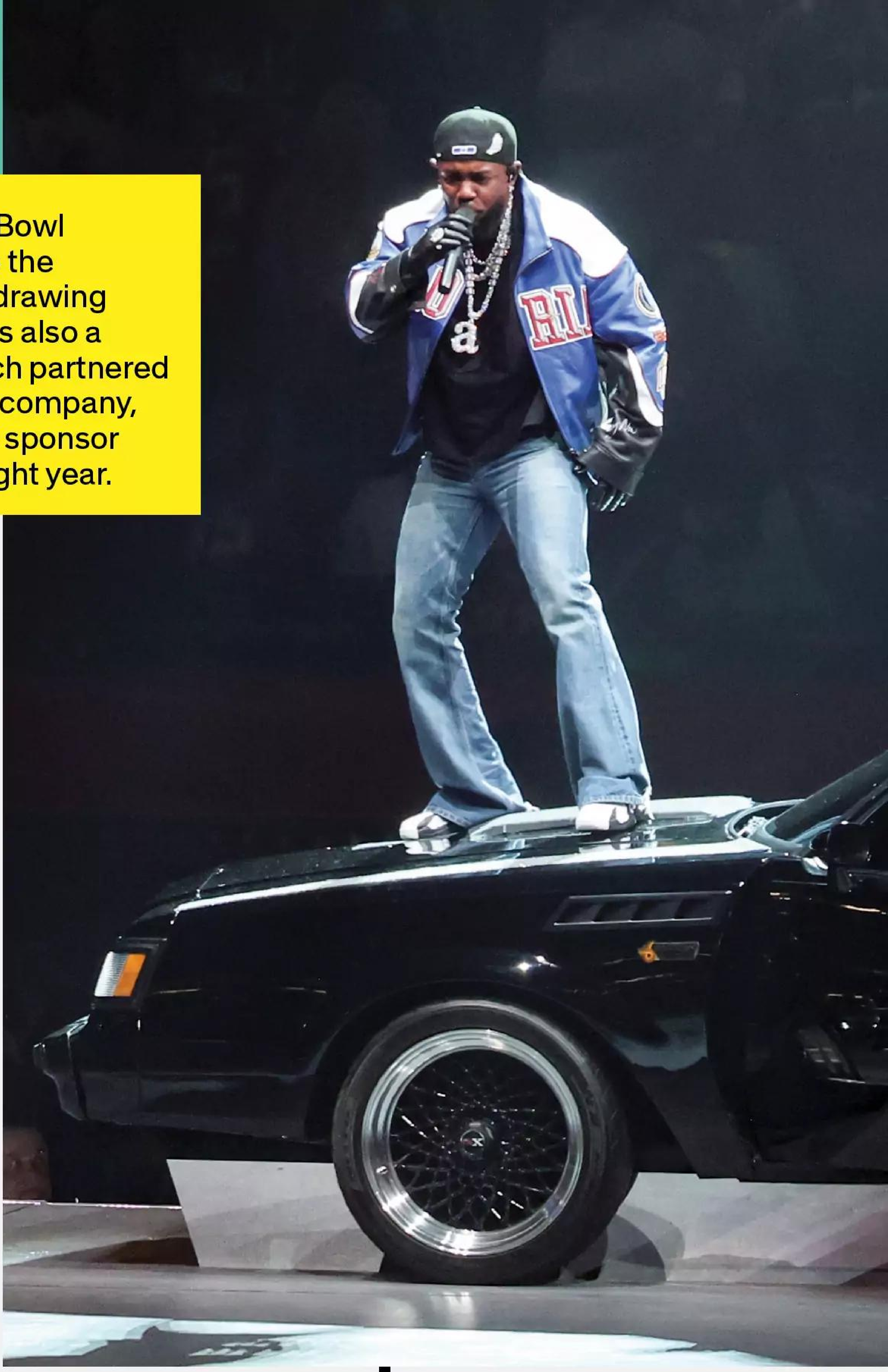
Anheuser-Busch brand Bud Light has worked with Post Malone since 2017, and in 2024, they teamed for “A Night in Nashville” — a live show providing 1,500 fans with an exclusive first listen to his first country album, *F-1 Trillion*. “To share the experience with millions of fans worldwide, we debuted an exclusive cut of his then-unreleased track ‘Yours,’ offering a glimpse into this landmark moment,” Yoked says. It wasn’t “just a celebration of music,” she explains. “It was a testament” to the artist and brand’s combined “commitment to creating unforgettable moments for fans everywhere.”

WHAT WAS THE BEST CONCERT YOU SAW IN 2024, AND WHY?

Patti LaBelle’s 80/65 Tour. Love how she mixes her humor and personality into her sets. Plus, she and her team are great merch partners. Be sure to try her peach apple cobbler, if you haven’t already.

—D.J. VAUGHN

KENDRICK LAMAR’s Super Bowl LIX halftime show became the most-watched of all time, drawing 133.5 million viewers. It was also a boon for Apple Music, which partnered with Jay-Z’s management company, Roc Nation, and the NFL to sponsor the show for the third straight year.



MATT PLOTNIK

Global head of marketing, Apple Music, Apple Podcasts and Shazam

APPLE

By sponsoring Super Bowl halftime shows including Usher in 2024 and Kendrick Lamar in 2025, Apple has stamped its brand onto music’s biggest stage. For Lamar’s performance — the most viewed in history — Apple sponsored a preshow press conference and sent key personalities Zane Lowe and Ebro Darden to New Orleans for four days of Lamar-focused programming. The halftime show is the tech giant’s third straight partnership with the NFL and Jay-Z’s management company, Roc Nation, which, Plotnik says, is focused on being “absolutely bespoke to whoever that headliner is to make sure we’re representing their voice and their vision.” Famous for integrating musicians into commercials and other marketing, from Gorillaz’ “Feel Good Inc.” in a 2005 iPod ad to The Weeknd’s “Dancing in the Flames” for the iPhone 16 Pro last year, Apple is “focused on providing artists with the platform and tools to get their music and message out to the world,” Plotnik says.

JAMIE WILLIAMS COOPER

Global vp of brand public relations and influence

BACARDÍ

Last April, Bacardí Rum signed Camila Cabello to a two-year partnership, including what Cooper calls a “360 campaign” featuring the pop star’s single “I LUV IT” in brand commercials, as well as releasing a limited-edition bioplastic vinyl single derived from sugarcane and Bacardí videos explaining the process of creating it. Bacardí also renewed a multiyear partnership with Becky G, who launched the company’s Patrón Cristalino tequila last September at a Los Angeles event. And during the holidays, Bacardí’s D’Ussé cognac installed a QR code inside gift boxes that unlocked an augmented reality DJ performance with producer Hit-Boy. “It served as the perfect example of how music and cocktails can naturally intersect,” says Cooper, who has worked at Bacardí for about eight years. “Finding authentic collaborations for our brands through the lens of music has allowed us to connect with more new drinkers than ever before.”

JIM MOLLICA

Chief marketing officer

BOSE

Bose distinguished itself in the crowded earbuds/headphones space with a June commercial that featured a Little Simz synch and placements starring Blackpink’s Lisa, singer Tyla and singer-rapper Don Toliver. In 2023, the 60-plus-year-old music-tech company launched a “Turn the Dial” initiative that featured H.E.R., PinkPantheress, Laufey and others to raise awareness that just 2.8% of the world’s music is produced by women (a statistic reported by the University of Southern California’s Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which examined producer credits from 2012 to 2022). “Passionate fans blend genres and follow subgenres. Our goal is to reach consumers who love music regardless of what they listen to,” Mollica says. “If they have deep appreciation for high-quality audio and the emotional power music can have, we want to connect with them.”

MARC MENTRY

Chief brand officer/executive vp of brand marketing

CAPITAL ONE

The banking and credit card conglomerate teamed with Taylor Swift and Ticketmaster for the final U.S. leg of The Eras Tour to offer access to ticket presales for certain cardholders and a contest to win free tickets. The company partnered with iHeartRadio for its Jingle Ball tour (Katy Perry, Benson Boone, Teddy Swims) and music festival (Keith Urban, Doja Cat, Shaboozey) and presented JamFest (Mumford & Sons, The Black Keys, Nathaniel Rateliff), which took place during the NCAA’s March Madness tournament. It’s also a sponsor of NPR’s *Tiny Desk Contest* and subsequent tour. “We look for partners who care deeply about their fans and are willing to collaborate on unique, ‘money can’t buy’ experiences like private concerts, meet-and-greets and consumer activations,” says Mentry, a 26-year Capital One veteran who has worked in marketing, advertising and product development.

VAUGHN: COURTESY OF WALMART. LAMAR: CHRISTOPHER POLK.

CATHERINE FERDON
Chief marketing officer

ZACK ASHLEY
Global head of brand partnerships

MARK NOVACK
Head of music partnerships

CASH APP

Kendrick Lamar and SZA partnered with Cash App in December for ticket sales to their spring 2025 tour, which included heavily marketed discounts on merch, food and drink at the shows for holders of the company's prepaid Visa debit card. (Lamar also worked with Cash App in conjunction with his Juneteenth The Pop Out: Ken & Friends show last year in Los Angeles.) The company collaborated with Sabrina Carpenter to create coffee-shop pop-ups — including branded merch and menu items — in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles and issued a Carpenter-designed debit card. Cash App also promoted its "Invest in yourself" tagline through a commercial starring rapper Doechii, who talked about her investments, budgets and financial goals. "We're looking to partner with financial role models and artists who take an interest in educating their fans on smart financial choices," Ferdon says.

ALEX CRADDOCK
Chief marketing and content officer

CITI

In September, Citi revived its Citi Sound Vault program, which had been on hiatus since the pandemic, with hip-hop star Jack Harlow at the Brooklyn Paramount. The show "welcomed 2,800 fans including card members, press and invited guests for an unforgettable night of music celebrating the Citi Strata Premier card," Craddock says. Past Citi Sound Vault concerts featured artists such as Coldplay, Madonna, P!nk, Metallica and Eminem. Craddock's advice for artists who want to work with brand partners is to focus on their music. "As you build your fan base through clubs, festivals, social channels and other platforms, stay faithful to who you are as a person and as an artist," he says. "We're always looking for rising talent, and who knows? Someday we could work together."

In November, **ICE SPICE** helped promote the Chapter 2 Remix season of Epic Games' Fortnite Battle Royale with a livestream performance from New York's Times Square. "Music has been core to the Fortnite experience for years," Epic Games' Emily Levy says.

INTRODUCING *BILLBOARD*'S BRANDING GURUS

From multimillion-dollar Super Bowl commercials to Green Day selling its limited-edition Punk Bunny Coffee at 7-Eleven stores, music branding partnerships are becoming increasingly prominent and lucrative. "We see the business growing over the next several years," says Kevin Gelbard, the head of CAA's music brand partnerships division. With that in mind, *Billboard* is reintroducing its Branding Power Players list, with a focus on executives at top brands who are partnering with artists and banking on music to raise awareness and appreciation of their goods and services. To compile this list of honorees at 49 companies, we invited the music industry's top 15 branding gurus who work in the sector, including promoters, labels, music publishers and agencies, to weigh in. Using their intelligence, we have chronicled the achievements of dozens of brands over the past year, as well as the target audiences they seek to reach. (Editor's note: Brands including PepsiCo, Nike, Airbnb, Samsung and Red Bull that declined to participate are not included on this list.) —S.K.

Marcie Allen
PRESIDENT, **MAC CONSULTING**

Ron Broitman
EXECUTIVE VP OF GLOBAL SYNC, **WARNER MUSIC GROUP**

Rick Faigin
EXECUTIVE VP, **ACCELERATION COMMUNITY OF COMPANIES**

Brian Feit
FOUNDING PARTNER, **WE ARE BMF**

Kevin Gelbard
HEAD OF THE MUSIC BRAND PARTNERSHIPS DIVISION, **CAA**

Joe Killian
CEO, **KILLIAN AND COMPANY**

Andrew Klein
PRESIDENT OF GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS, **AEG PRESENTS**

Ik Ezeh, Shari Lewin
PARTNERS/AGENTS, **WME**

Stephanie Miles
HEAD OF MUSIC BRAND PARTNERSHIPS, **WASSERMAN MUSIC**

Brian Monaco
PRESIDENT/GLOBAL CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER, **SONY MUSIC PUBLISHING**

Jeff Straughn
PARTNER/CHIEF BRAND OFFICER, **PRIMARY WAVE MUSIC**

Toni Wallace
PARTNER/HEAD OF MUSIC BRAND STRATEGY AND PARTNERSHIPS, **UTA**

Russell Wallach
GLOBAL PRESIDENT OF MEDIA AND SPONSORSHIP, **LIVE NATION**

Richard Yaffa
EXECUTIVE VP OF GLOBAL BRANDS, **UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP**

JOSHUA BURKE
Global head of music and culture marketing

THE COCA-COLA CO.

Working with Universal Music Group's brands division and Spotify's music consultancy, the soft-drink giant spent 2024 expanding its Coke Studio concept, which launched in Pakistan more than 16 years ago. Today, the company says, the resulting music video-slash-commercials — which feature plenty of red-and-white can imagery — have generated more than 5 billion views on various platforms. Recent productions include Tyla's "Tears," Peggy Gou's "Find the Way" and Karol G's "Si Antes Te Hubiera Conocido." Meanwhile, the company's Sprite Limelight activation worked with production duo Take a Daytrip to record video content with artists such as Doechii and Fireboy DML and post it on Sprite's 963,000-subscriber YouTube channel. "By moving away from standard advertising campaigns and instead co-creating meaningful experiences with artists and music partners, we've been able to deliver greater value for everyone involved," Burke says, adding that Coke emphasizes music discovery: "We are particularly passionate about empowering the future music creators."

JESSE DAMASHEK
Senior vp of whiskey portfolio, North America

KAREN HARRIS
Acting senior vp of tequila and mezcal,
North America

TRACY DOYLE
Senior vp of brands in culture

DIAGEO

Diageo spent 2024 aggressively linking its familiar liquor brands to artists and splashy music events: Tequila Don Julio worked with Sony Music and Spotify to sponsor private concerts with singer-songwriter Christian Nodal and held a pre-Super Bowl dueling-pianos event on Bourbon Street with an electronic boost from DJs John Summit and Dom Dolla. Smirnoff vodka was a sponsor at last year's Grammy Awards, and Crown Royal was the official whiskey for Kane Brown's In the Air country tour. Citing Diageo's support for regional Mexican artists, Harris says: "We are always looking for ways to highlight authentic, modern Mexican art and storytelling, and music has proven to be an impactful tool for connecting with consumers." Doyle, a four-year Diageo executive, adds, "We're embracing nostalgia and partnering with top names in the music industry to create a dynamic fusion of old and new."

EMILY LEVY
Director of music, talent and influencer

EPIC GAMES

Fortnite, which conquered the 2020 shelter-in-place phase of the pandemic with an in-game Travis Scott concert that drew more than 12 million players, continued its pop-star partnership program last year. In November, as part of its promotion of the Chapter 2 Remix season of Fortnite Battle Royale, the game livestreamed a Times Square performance by Ice Spice and Snoop Dogg. Later, it premiered the late Juice WRLD's "Empty Out Your Pockets" video. These efforts helped the Remix: The Finale concert event draw more than 14 million concurrent players. In addition to live events and album and single debuts, artists employ Fortnite "to create social spaces or music-enabled experiences that simply could not exist anywhere else," Levy says. "In Fortnite, artists are able to interact with existing and new fans in a really authentic way at an unprecedented scale." Among the participating artists in the game's music events, including Fortnite Festival, over the past year have been Billie Eilish, Lady Gaga, The Weeknd, Karol G and Metallica.

CALVIN LEUNG
Head of creative, Gap brand

GAP

Janet Jackson's 1997 hit "Together Again" was the biggest star in Gap's 2024 holiday campaign, which featured an eight-person a cappella choir of "emerging talents in the community," Leung says, including PawPaw Rod and Lamont Landers. Other memorable (and more heavily choreographed) spots: Troye Sivan leading a fleet of dancers in white T-shirts and baggy jeans to Thundercat's 2020 song "Funny Thing" and Tyla doing the same with Jungle's 2023 track "Back on 74." "Almost all of our campaign music went viral this year, which helped us reach new audiences and be a part of the cultural conversation," says Leung, whose company has worked with top music stars such as Madonna, LL COOL J and Childish Gambino for decades. "Music has always been at the heart of our brand, and we challenged ourselves not to just make the obvious choices, but to make the smart ones."

Perhaps not coincidentally, **SHABOOZEY** was one of the most active artists in promoting brands in 2024, the year he dominated the Billboard Hot 100 with "A Bar Song (Tipsy)." He starred in a trippy Super Bowl commercial for Nerds candy and worked with Jack Daniel's, among others.

AARON SIMON
Vp of global partnerships

HARMAN INTERNATIONAL

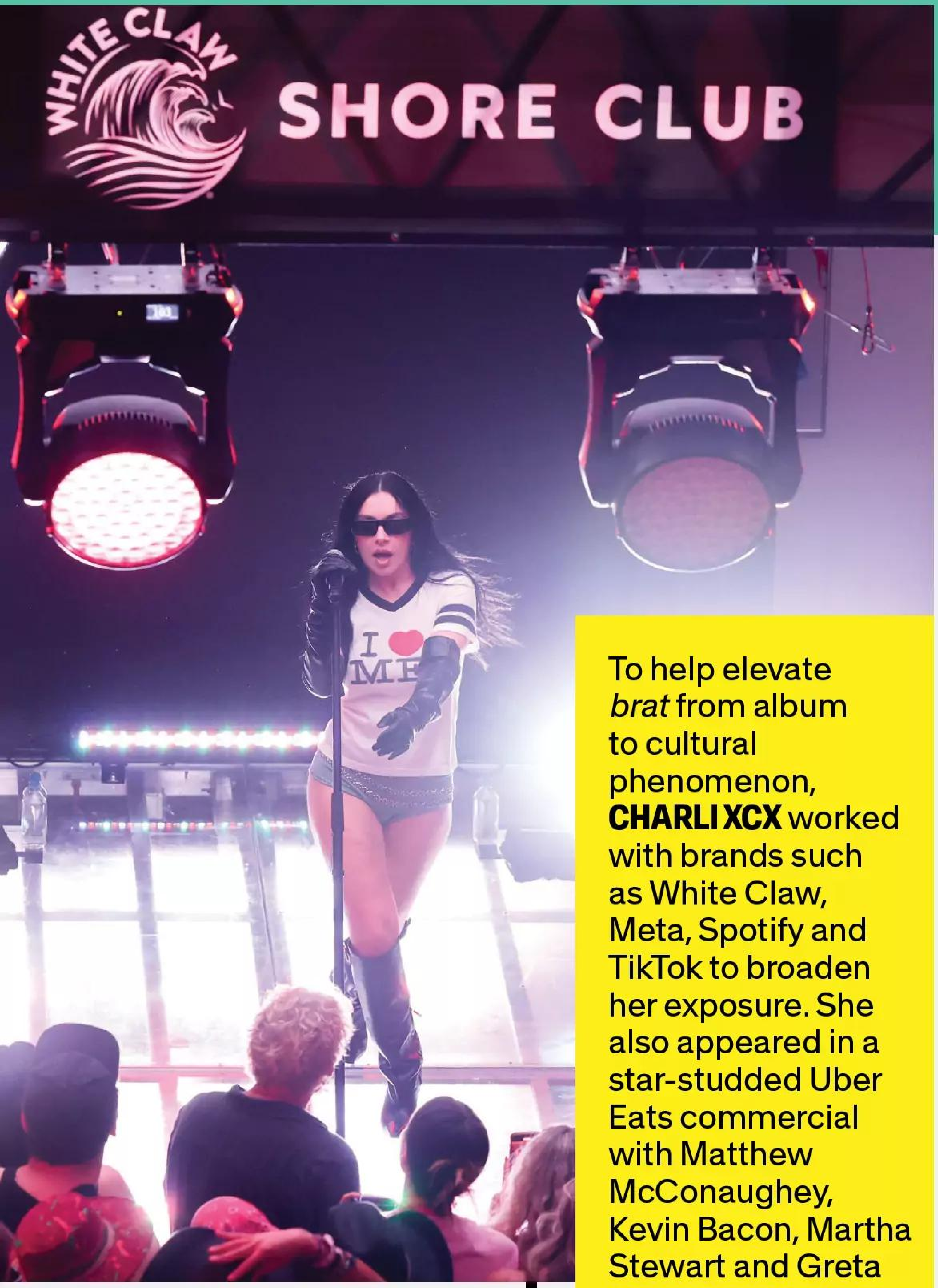
Harman, including its audio-component division, JBL, scored more than 100 partnerships in 2024 — among them, a collaboration with singer-songwriter Madison Beer for exclusive content made with the company's headphones and other technology, and the second edition of the Martin Garrix & JBL Music Academy for emerging musicians. (Garrix is a brand ambassador.) JBL Fest, starring Beer, rapper-athlete Flau'jae Johnson and DJ duo Two Friends, played at New York venues, and Harman provided JBL's newest-generation VTX A-Series loudspeakers for a complete upgrade of the sound system at Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles. The latter project is part of an "ongoing partnership," as Simon calls it, with promoter AEG, providing "professional audio experiences" to "align our iconic JBL brand with the world's largest owner of sports teams and events." Harman's target audience, Simon adds, "enjoys a wide range of music genres," which he can relate to, because "I have finally become a fan of K-pop in 2024."

WHAT WAS THE BEST CONCERT YOU SAW IN 2024, AND WHY?

Taylor Swift's The Eras Tour in Paris. It was a surprise Christmas gift for both of my daughters — and it was their first concert ever.

—JAMIE WILLIAMS COOPER

ICE SPICE: JAMES DEVANEY/GC IMAGES. SHABOOZEY: ALLAN PIMENTA/COURTESY OF JACK DANIEL'S. COOPER: COURTESY OF BACARDÍ.



To help elevate *brat* from album to cultural phenomenon, **CHARLI XCX** worked with brands such as White Claw, Meta, Spotify and TikTok to broaden her exposure. She also appeared in a star-studded Uber Eats commercial with Matthew McConaughey, Kevin Bacon, Martha Stewart and Greta Gerwig for the 2025 Super Bowl.

MARK WEINSTEIN
Chief marketing officer

HILTON

Since the days of John Lennon scrawling the lyrics to "Imagine" on hotel stationery at the Hilton Midtown and Keith Richards writing the "Satisfaction" riff at Hilton London — not to mention Keith Moon and other rockers trashing their rooms — hotels have been synonymous with music. Which is a concept Hilton leveraged last year through its Stay in the Music program. It offered hospitality and pop-up stages at Hilton properties to rising indie singer-songwriters like RAYE and Becky Hill, who also appeared in ads and social media clips. The hotelier is a major player during Grammy week, hosting record mogul Clive Davis' annual party at The Beverly Hilton and, in February 2024, an intimate pre-awards show by eventual best traditional pop album winner Laufey. The company also partners with Red Light Management, Universal Music Group and the Wasserman agency on private concerts and unique experiences, such as a Dave Matthews wine-tasting and a Teddy Swims rooftop performance. "Music is such a critical part of our fan-engagement strategy," Weinstein says.

MEGAN AMIC
Manager/head of media, American Honda

HONDA

Although Honda isn't as active in music branding as it was during the years of its star-studded Civic Tour, which promoted such acts as Fall Out Boy and Kelly Clarkson, the automaker's long-running Honda Stage program continues to draw rising talent to its intimate setting. In December, singer Amirah performed her single "Away From Me" shortly before it came out, with her producer, Mustard, accompanying her on acoustic guitar. Mustard did an interview on Honda Stage's YouTube channel shortly after that, drawing 931,000 views, "at a point in his career when his star power was undeniable, after he took on a producer role for Kendrick Lamar's *GNX*," says Amic, a former NBCUniversal media director who helped launch *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. In addition to Honda Stage, which has recently featured singer Maeta and a duet between singer Lila Iké and Afrobeats producer Davido, the company sponsors Austin City Limits, Head in the Clouds and other festivals.

PETER TAYLOR
Vp of network partnerships

HULU

Hulu has doubled down on the festival livestream space, partnering with the promoters of Lollapalooza, Austin City Limits, Bonnaroo and iHeartMedia for its Country Music Festival and iHeartRadio Music Festival. The streaming service, which boasts 50 million subscribers, incorporates on-site interviews and interstitials as well as festival highlights and onstage views that bring fans closer to the action. "Our focus on festivals puts our viewers on location when they'd love to be there but can't," Taylor says. "We want to deliver an experience to music fans that puts them in the mix, feeling the live-music vibe in real time."

GREG LUEHRS
Director of sponsorship and events

LONI GRAY
Brand director

MICHELLE SAUER
Brand manager

JACK DANIEL'S

Shaboozey's lyric "Me and Jack Daniel's got a history," from his 2024 smash "A Bar Song (Tipsy)," led to a partnership between the artist and his management company, Range Music, and the iconic Tennessee whiskey brand. It played out in different ways: tour sponsorship, a corporate-spokesman role for Shaboozey and the singer's appearances in videos touring Jack Daniel's distilleries. "It's been fun to watch Jack Daniel's go where Shaboozey goes," Gray says. In April, the whiskey-maker also launched Jack's Garage, a pop-up stage at Formula 1 races featuring stars such as Brothers Osborne, T-Pain and, yes, Shaboozey. "We're always eager to partner with folks who know who their fan is and understand where a partnership can add value," Sauer says.

CARLA ZAKHEM-HASSAN
Global chief marketing officer

JPMORGANCHASE

The financial services giant spent 2024 investing in "a series of remarkable music experiences," Zakhem-Hassan says. They included Zedd's private DJ lessons at Lollapalooza, Marc Roberge's surprise performance at the brand's Oceans Calling Festival VIP lounge for Chase cardholders and a $1-per-ticket promotion for a J. Cole show at Madison Square Garden in New York. The company also maintained its long-standing MSG partnership, including the Chase Lounge, where Kelsea Ballerini did a meet-and-greet. "We're looking for collaborations that align with our brand values, bring big ideas to the table and help us push the boundaries of creativity," Zakhem-Hassan says. "We strive to understand what matters to an artist and seek authentic ways to grow together."

RUSSELL WAGER
Vp of marketing

KIA AMERICA

The automaker, which owns naming rights for Los Angeles' Kia Forum and Orlando, Fla.'s Kia Center, provides what Wager calls "unforgettable 'surprise and delight' moments" for VIPs at the venues' Kia Clubs. "We elevate the experience for Kia owners with exclusive access to music-themed spaces, hospitality and activations," he says. Although Kia mostly focused its music-branding efforts on those venues in 2024, the company emphasizes "something for everyone, ensuring a connection with diverse audiences," Wager adds. "We're particularly drawn to artists who embody a strong will and determination — values that mirror Kia's journey as a brand."

WHAT GENRES DOES YOUR TARGET FAN LISTEN TO?

> We've seen that younger travelers are embracing "second cultures" that allow them to explore and immerse themselves in other parts of the world. Recent studies show that 72% of Gen Z and millennials in the U.S. are listening to music from artists originating outside the U.S.
>
> —PEGGY ROE

CHARLI XCX: WHITE CLAW. ROE: COURTESY OF MARRIOTT.

MEGAN McKENZIE

Head of U.S. marketing and marketing communications

LINCOLN

Last May, Lincoln soundtracked an ad for its new Nautilus SUV with an electronic track by two producers from the commercial-music team Heavy Duty Projects, and online viewers spontaneously started a grassroots campaign to figure out the song's title. After a Reddit "sleuthing effort," as McKenzie calls it, Lincoln revealed it to be "Kaleidoscope Bliss (The Nautilus Song)," complete with a video that has racked up 40,000 YouTube views. ("I am going to continue my search for this Catchy Song, if it takes me to my last day's," one redditor posted.) "We were pleasantly surprised that this track would resonate so deeply with diverse audiences," says McKenzie, a 14-year Lincoln employee who previously worked at Lincoln's parent company, Ford. Over the years, Lincoln has featured artists such as Harry Connick Jr. and Gary Clark Jr. in its ads, using such collaborations to "highlight our dedication to weaving music into our brand identity," McKenzie adds.

MIKE CESSARIO

CEO

LIQUID DEATH

Nearly four years after Live Nation and other partners invested $15 million in the canned water company marketed with punk-and-metal imagery and gallows humor advertising, Liquid Death remains the official water brand for most of the top promoter's venues and festivals. Its *Liquid Death Greatest Hates, Vol. 3* album, released in 2024 with collaborations from skateboard hero Tony Hawk and others, created '80s-style pop music out of online haters' comments about the brand. "Worst Name for a Water Company" is the opening track. The brand also collaborated with Depend in December on a black, goth-looking "pit diaper" for music fans who don't want to miss a minute of a concert. "Fans of all genres drink water and iced tea," Cessario says, adding, "even a nonmetal fan can think the concept of a pit diaper is funny." It's not surprising, then, when Cessario says artists will succeed in partnering with Liquid Death if they are "down to not take [themselves] too seriously and make something hilarious."

JAMIE RATH

White Claw brand director

KEVIN BRADY

Vp of marketing

MARK ANTHONY BRANDS

Last July's White Claw Fest wasn't so much a festival as a virtual reality performance by Charli xcx — "right as she kicked off Brat Summer," Rath says. Users who aimed their phones at a White Claw product logo launched the pop star's performance of "360" as a 3D hologram. "We're actively engaging with our fans to ensure we're showing up at the festivals and events they care about," Brady explains. In 2024, these events included the Boston Calling, When We Were Young and Outside Lands festivals; concerts at Red Rocks Amphitheater in Colorado; brand-sponsored "club sessions" performances by Galantis, Two Friends and others; and White Claw Shore Club sets by Shaboozey and Charli xcx at Coachella. "We think about the opportunity here like a variety pack," Brady says. "There's something for everyone."

PEGGY ROE

Executive vp/chief customer officer

MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL

The hotel chain's work on Taylor Swift's The Eras Tour "transcended a traditional sponsorship," says Roe, a 22-year company veteran. Marriott provided Swifties with deals on travel packages, hotels, meals, spa treatments, on-site bracelet-making stations and what Roe calls a "private glam session to get ready for the show." As an example, a Marriott contest in October offered the winning fan two tickets to Swift's final show in Vancouver, plus airfare and lodging — a $4,949 value, according to the brand. The hotelier also offered a one-hour, 20-person Los Angeles dance lesson with *NSYNC's Lance Bass to its roster of celebrity Marriott Bonvoy Moments. "We are most eager to reach music fans whose passion for music drives them to travel near and far," Roe says.

RAJA RAJAMANNAR

Chief marketing and communications officer

MASTERCARD

As part of its renewed live-music strategy, Mastercard formed a partnership with Live Nation to connect cardholders across Europe and Asia-Pacific with exclusive benefits such as early ticket access, VIP experiences and what Rajamannar calls "behind-the-scenes moments." Mastercard also expanded its presence in venues and festivals across the United States. Through a deal with Live Nation's Ones To Watch development platform, the credit card giant launched a second year of its Mastercard Artist Accelerator for new artists. "And, in turn," Rajamannar says, "we're connecting with their growing fan bases in new, innovative ways."

In addition to selling more than 10 million tickets and grossing over $2 billion, **TAYLOR SWIFT**'s The Eras Tour partnered with several corporate sponsors, including Capital One, for ticket-selling promotions, and Marriott, for travel packages.

KATE GREEN/GETTY IMAGES

TARIQ HASSAN

Chief marketing and customer experience officer

McDONALD'S USA

Even before its 1970s theme "You deserve a break today," McDonald's combined music, marketing and advertising. Last year, the fast-food stalwart's music campaigns were relatively modest, including a low-key synch of "Ooh Wee," Mark Ronson's funky 2003 track with Ghostface Killah and Nate Dogg, in a Super Bowl XIV commercial; a synch of Benny Benassi's 2003 dance hit "Satisfaction" in a December commercial; and a limited-edition Taylor Swift-themed "meal deal" menu in Canada involving chicken sandwiches and friendship bracelets. Dua Lipa and The Killers performed for McDonald's employees, operators and other stakeholders in Barcelona at the company's annual convention. "McDonald's USA continues to focus at placing the brand at the heart of culture," says Hassan, a marketing and communications vet who previously worked at HP, Bank of America and Petco. Citing the McDonald's custom playlists on Spotify and other services, he adds: "Our best partnerships are when we're able to find synergy and elevate an artist's true fandom of McDonald's."

MELODY LEE

Chief marketing officer

MERCEDES-BENZ USA

Last year, Lee helped create an intimate concert series in partnership with Auberge Resorts Collection that featured performances by LeAnn Rimes, Maren Morris and Kate Hudson at three of the latter's luxury properties. As part of the packages, guests were able to test-drive several Mercedes-Benz vehicles during their stay. Lee also launched The Table, a culinary series that celebrated culture and innovation — where video screens doubled as tabletops — beginning with an event co-hosted by Mercedes brand ambassador Alicia Keys in Los Angeles. The festivities included a performance by Keys' protégé, Ayoni, who is part of the "Fallin' " singer's She Is the Music nonprofit. "By blending technology, music and culture," Lee says, "we create experiences that aim to resonate with our audience and underscore our role as a cultural leader in the luxury space."

ESHAN PONNADURAI

Vp of consumer marketing

META

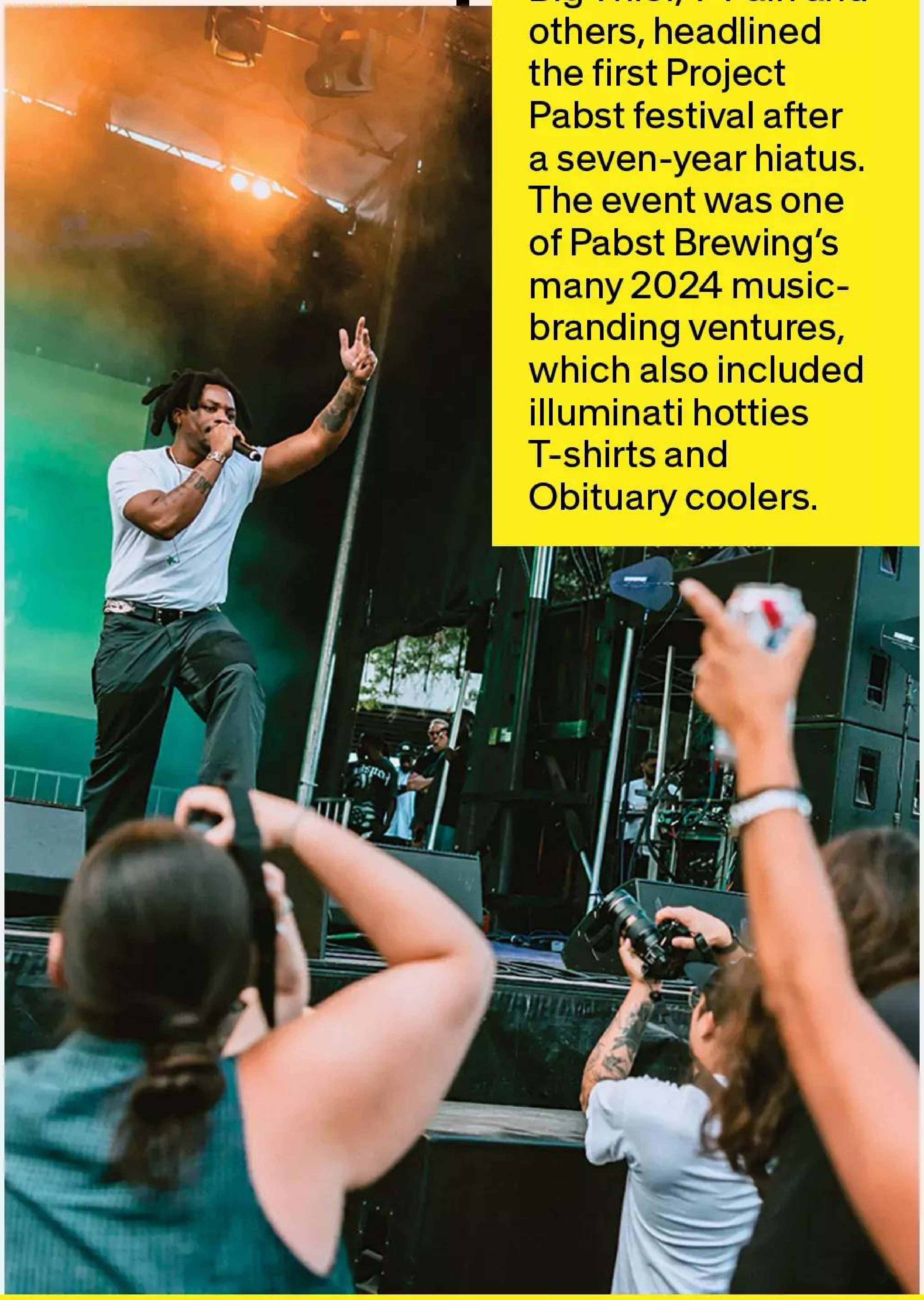
In 2024, Meta partnered with Lil Yachty, who added all of his 11.3 million Instagram followers to his Close Friends list, a feature that lets account holders share exclusive content with those who make the cut. The feature is meant to help artists facilitate more intimate connections with their superfans. Billie Eilish used it ahead of the release of *Hit Me Hard and Soft*, and Meta leveraged the feature's popularity to create Instagram's *Close Friends Only* original series with Megan Thee Stallion and GloRilla, in which the rappers shared "hilarious and intimate anecdotes about their friendship, careers and personal lives," Ponnadurai says. Meta also collaborated with Dua Lipa on the Add Yours Music sticker that enables users to share tracks from Instagram's music library. Sabrina Carpenter debuted another feature that allows users to add a song player to their Instagram profile.

ADAM DETTMAN

Head of partnerships, North America

MOLSON COORS BEVERAGE

Dettman's team launched the Coors Light Chill Amplified music platform last year, forming artist partnerships with country star Lainey Wilson, hip-hop icon LL COOL J and indie rockers Mt. Joy, along with 2024 breakout star Shaboozey and reggaetón pioneer Yandel. "We're looking for artists that enjoy our brands whether backstage or in their backyard," he says, adding, "We are excited to collaborate with artists that are actively dropping new music and touring, creating cultural moments for brand amplification. We're also eager to understand what's important to our artist partners. Knowing what they enjoy helps us identify how our brands can play a role in making those moments even better."



DENZEL CURRY, along with Billy Idol, Big Thief, T-Pain and others, headlined the first Project Pabst festival after a seven-year hiatus. The event was one of Pabst Brewing's many 2024 music-branding ventures, which also included illuminati hotties T-shirts and Obituary coolers.

SAM GEHRKE FOR PROJECT PABST

SHELLY GILLYARD

Vp of marketing, U.S. and Canada

NETFLIX

Gillyard's assertion that Netflix's Beyoncé Bowl, a Christmas Day livestream performance in her Houston hometown during halftime of the Baltimore Ravens-Houston Texans game, was "the biggest music moment of the year" is not an exaggeration. In addition to the superstar's entrance on horseback in a bright-white feathered coat, the show — which drew 50 million international viewers — starred Post Malone, Shaboozey, the Texans cheerleaders and the singer's daughter Blue Ivy Carter. "The world was waiting for that performance," Gillyard says. The streaming service, which reported 302 million subscribers in fourth-quarter 2024, also released a documentary on Olivia Rodrigo's *GUTS* tour, a Sabrina Carpenter holiday special and spun its TV series *Outer Banks* into a tour featuring the cast and a fan event called Poguelandia, which included a Los Angeles stop with performances by Jungle, GloRilla and Remi Wolf.

RACHEL KEETON

Senior brand director

KAT MATA

Director of culture marketing

PABST BREWING

After a seven-year break, Pabst Blue Ribbon brought its two-day Project Pabst festival back to Portland, Ore., last July, starring Denzel Curry, Billy Idol, Big Thief and T-Pain. It's "what PBR is all about, from the lineup to the affordable beer prices," Keeton says. The beer company also worked with death metal band Obituary on a branded cooler that was sold at its tour dates and collaborated with illuminati hotties on black-and-white, minimalist punk-style T-shirts and other merch sold at their gigs last fall. Atlanta indie-rockers Lunar Vacation also did a PBR-promoted merch sale for its summer tour, donating some of the proceeds to the Palestine Children's Relief Fund. "We try to build a connection to music by working with festivals and artists that are relevant to our drinkers," says Mk.gee fan Mata, who lists punk, metal, hardcore, indie rock, pop-punk and alt-country as genres that go "hand in hand" with the brand.

Rocket, the Detroit-based mortgage company, licensed the late **JOHN DENVER**'s classic "Take Me Home, Country Roads" for a Super Bowl commercial in February as well as a stadium sing-along at the Caesars Superdome in New Orleans.

GEOFF SEELEY
Chief marketing officer

PAYPAL

Will Ferrell helped land Fleetwood Mac a synch for its 1987 hit "Everywhere" by arguing with donkeys, children at lemonade stands and grocery store customers in a PayPal commercial last September. ("I want to pay with you everywhere," he sang.) "This was unlike anything we've done before," Seeley says, "leaning into pop culture icons like Will and Fleetwood Mac to put the brand back on the main stage." PayPal, which has a long-term Ticketmaster partnership, also boosted its music-business exposure in 2024 by working with the Lollapalooza, Bonnaroo and BottleRock festivals on cash-back offers for certain ticket-buyers. "Our target fan covers all genres," says the former Cash App and Afterpay marketing executive, who joined the company in February 2024 and also works with its Venmo brand. "Everyone's a music fan, right? We support the experience we all have with music, whether that's buying tickets and merchandise or paying your friend back for the drinks they bought."

NADINE ZYLSTRA
Global head of programming and originals

PINTEREST

Pinterest's growing audience, more than 40% of which is Gen Z and mostly outside the United States, hit over 500 million global monthly visitors last year, and the company partnered with the Coachella music festival last April. A Pinterest Manifest Station located on the festival grounds offered beauty products and accessories chosen by celebrity stylists and artists including Victoria Monét and Ludmilla. The K-pop girl group TWICE curated a holiday gift guide of vlogging cameras, cozy slippers and other items. And Tierra Whack, who used Pinterest to develop the visual aesthetic for her 2024 album, *World Wide Whack*, unveiled a board on the platform's new sharing feature for videos on social media sites like Instagram and TikTok. "Fanships large and small find community on Pinterest," Zylstra says. "We loved the creative ways in which we partnered with artists to reach their fans."

RYAN WASHATKA
Senior vp of sports, entertainment and partnerships

RAKUTEN

The online marketplace leaned heavily into music with its Concert Week promotion with Live Nation, in which Rakuten members received 24-hour early access to $25 concert tickets. The event resulted in a 93% year-over-year increase in account signups and a 161% surge in first-time purchases through the site, according to Washatka. Live Nation, Ticketmaster, StubHub, Vivid Seats and individual concerts by Adele, Bruno Mars, Billie Eilish and others joined Rakuten's Cash Back program, where customers who purchased tickets from these platforms through the site received a rebate. "The Concert Week partnership is a perfect example of how Rakuten's expertise in Cash Back and rewards creates value for both our members and partners while fueling business growth," he says.

JONATHAN MILDENHALL
Chief marketing officer

ROCKET

For its new Own the Dream campaign, the Detroit-based mortgage company "looked at music that could elevate, uplift and unite the country," Mildenhall says. It landed on John Denver's classic "Take Me Home, Country Roads," which was used in the brand's Super Bowl LIX spot. (And yes, the sing-along Mildenhall's team orchestrated at Caesars Superdome immediately following the 60-second commercial counted as a synch.) As part of Own the Dream, Mildenhall says, Rocket intends to "partner in collaboration with musicians and vocalists in many different sectors of the home-buying population" and predicts the campaign "should, if we govern it correctly, last a minimum of a decade."

JORDY FREED
Director/head of brand, business development, partner marketing and strategy

SONY CORPORATION OF AMERICA

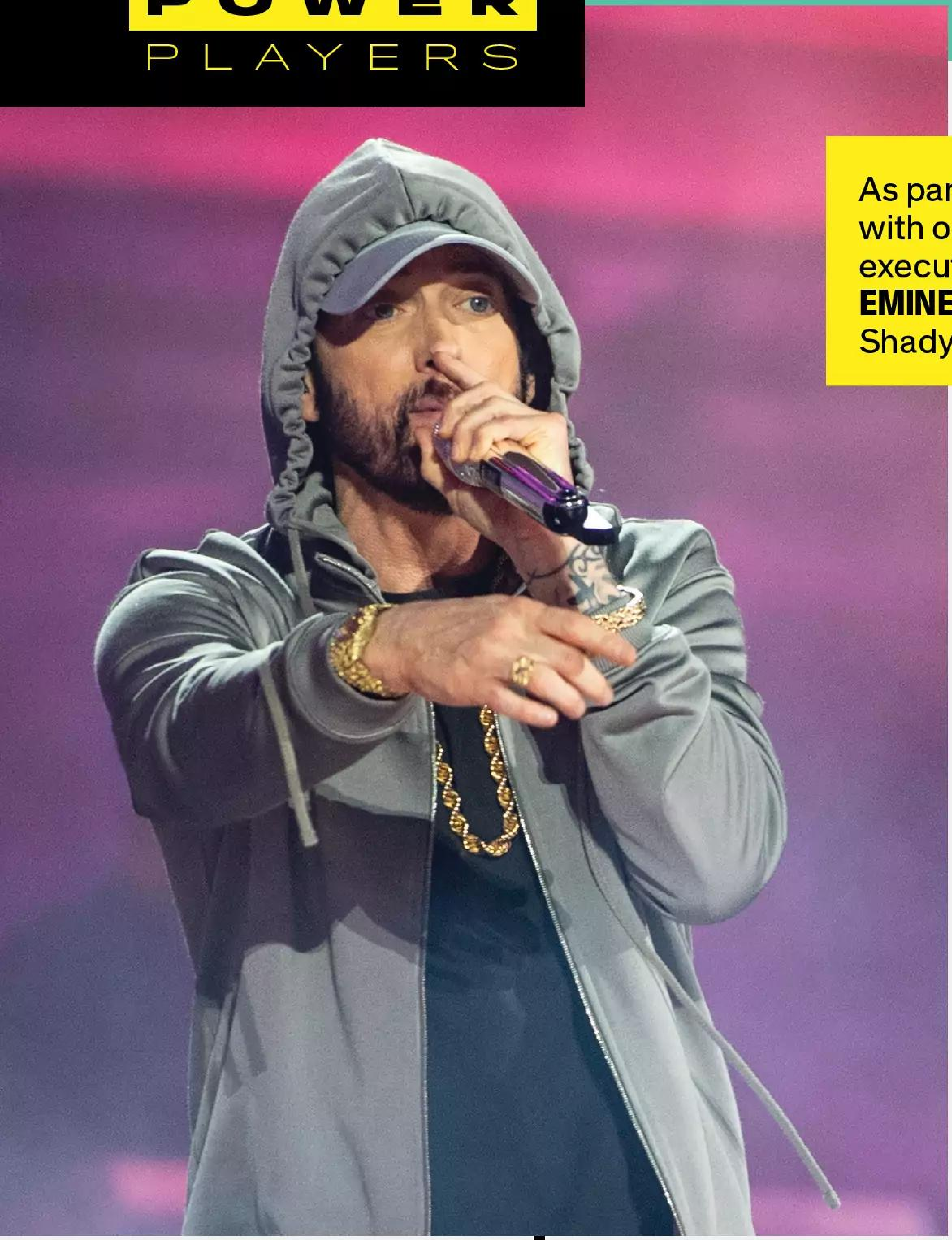
Freed says Sony's main music-branding achievement has been the creation of "a culture, ethos and ultimately a brand platform centered around empowering creators," relying on its extensive history in the high-end audio space. The company has partnered with Peso Pluma for the brand's ULT Power Sound series speaker and Olivia Rodrigo on new custom EQ tech for her music. "Sony Audio has always been at the intersection of creation and consumption, so empowering all creators is an extension of our brand heritage," Freed says. "We're meeting the next generation of creators where they are and providing tools for their development."

WHAT WAS THE BEST CONCERT YOU SAW IN 2024, AND WHY?

Zach Bryan. My 14-year-old daughter suggested we go. She discovered Zach via some friends at school, and now he's one of her – and my – favorite artists.

—TAMI HURWITZ

DENVER: DISNEY/GETTY IMAGES. HURWITZ: COURTESY OF AMAZON MUSIC.



As part of its tradition of “infiltrating the hip-hop/rap scene with organic vehicle placements within music videos,” as executive Mark Malmstead puts it, Dodge worked with **EMINEM** last July for a magazine cover shoot involving Slim Shady and a red Charger Daytona.

AARON J. THORNTON/GETTY IMAGES

MARC HAZAN

Vp of marketing and partnerships

SPOTIFY

In 2024, Spotify continued “the unique ways we used our brand to connect artists and fans,” Hazan says. The company partnered with Coldplay and soccer powerhouse FC Barcelona for custom-logo jerseys worn for a key match in October. It also celebrated 25 of The Weeknd’s songs crossing 1 billion streams with an exclusive-for-fans December concert at Barker Hangar in Los Angeles and a 45-minute film documenting the show. To promote its year-end Wrapped feature, the company also customized its signature green logo to incorporate some of the year’s biggest releases, including Charli xcx’s album *brat* and Sabrina Carpenter’s hit single “Espresso.” “There isn’t one genre we’re focused on over another,” Hazan says. “We’re always considering our fans’ broader interests and how we can connect most authentically.”

PERRIS FIORI

Vp of marketing

STE. MICHELLE WINE ESTATES

The 58-year-old wine estate, based in Woodinville, Wash., is the site of concerts big and small — from an annual summer hoedown to a long-running concert series at its amphitheater that has featured Stevie Wonder, Bob Dylan and John Legend. Chateau Ste. Michelle is also Live Nation’s official wine sponsor at 80-plus venues and festivals, including Governors Ball in New York, which exposes the brand to “millions of music fans,” Fiori says. “Introducing Chateau Ste. Michelle wines to younger, 21-plus consumer audiences is key to ensuring the winery’s continued longevity.” The partnership with the top promoter — which also books the estate’s 4,500-capacity amphitheater — provides this demographic with “product sampling” at venues and broader social media exposure. Chateau Ste. Michelle, Fiori adds, is an “authentic, unpretentious brand” that seeks a “like-minded company ethos” when partnering with artists and music companies.

MARK MALMSTEAD

Head of Dodge/SRT marketing

STELLANTIS

Two Detroit icons, Dodge and Eminem, appeared together last July for a *Complex* magazine cover shoot in which a Slim Shady stand-in ties up Marshall Mathers and imprisons him in a red Charger Daytona. “Edgy, relevant and aligned perfectly with Dodge,” Malmstead says. The automaker, which also has partnered on promotions with Billie Eilish and Chris Stapleton, has “often infiltrated the hip-hop/rap scene with organic vehicle placements within music videos,” Malmstead adds. And while RAM trucks are technically no longer part of the Dodge brand — they’re owned by Chrysler, a subsidiary of Stellantis — they were the memorable focus of a 2025 Super Bowl ad starring actor Glen Powell, dragons, kids and a synch of Van Halen’s “Panama.”

MIKE BELCHER

Senior vp of business development and partnerships

T-MOBILE

According to Belcher, the T-Mobile Tickets program “provides customers with access to hundreds of thousands of specially priced tickets to shows at over 120 venues across the country” — from New York’s Webster Hall to Denver’s Ogden Theatre. The wireless network operator also partnered with the Stagecoach, Lollapalooza and Austin City Limits festivals and touring artists such as Sabrina Carpenter, Luke Combs, Lainey Wilson and Common. At some shows with T-Mobile partnerships, the company’s Magenta Lounge offers VIP access, a private space and other perks. “Customer benefits have long been part of the ethos of the brand,” Belcher says, “and our entertainment partnerships really brought that to life this year.”

TAYLOR MONTGOMERY

Chief marketing officer, North America

TACO BELL

Taco Bell has supported more than 2,000 touring musicians since 2006 through its Feed the Beat initiative, which provides free restaurant gift cards worth up to $500. That program has turned into a gateway for larger partnership deals with artists like Omar Apollo, who collaborated with the chain on Disha Hot sauce, which was inspired by the “Evergreen (You Didn’t Deserve Me at All)” singer’s secret family recipe. And in January 2024, Apollo and fellow Feed the Beat alum Armani White performed at Taco Bell’s first Live Más LIVE event. “It was a perfect blend of music, culture and fandom, showcasing how Taco Bell continues to meet fans where they are and celebrate what they love,” Montgomery says. This year’s Live Más LIVE was scheduled for January in Los Angeles but moved to March 4 at the Brooklyn Paramount due to the January wildfires.

LEAH LINDER

Director of communications

ANDINA BADRI

Global head of music and product marketing

ALIX HENICK IGER

Global music industry marketing lead

ALESSANDRA MARIANI

Music user and product lead, marketing

TIKTOK

Before TikTok became a political football, the Chinese-run social media giant formed music-business partnerships with artists across several genres. Billie Eilish used new features like Flip Story and Fan Spotlight to promote her album *Hit Me Hard and Soft* and subsequent tour. The company worked with Rauw Alejandro to produce a livestream concert, a TikTok Shop for exclusive merch and an in-app “experience” for his 2024 album, *Cosa Nuestra*. And the platform promoted the release of BTS member Jin’s solo EP, *Happy*, with a live interview, exclusive videos and other content. The branding deals, Badri says, speak to TikTok’s overall music-business mission: “We want to give the best music experience for all music fans, regardless of age, locations and music taste.”

WHAT MUSIC FANS ARE YOU MOST EAGER TO REACH, AND HOW DO YOU BEST REACH THEM?

Music fans with a great sense of humor that love comedy. We reach them in many ways, from Live Nation concerts to them scrolling their social feeds.

—MIKE CESSARIO

COURTESY OF LIQUID DEATH

DEDRA DELILLI

Vp of marketing communications

TOYOTA

The carmaker's long-running Music Den continued to provide free merch like bandannas and camping socks as up-and-coming stars like Blu DeTiger and Tiny Habits performed at top festivals throughout 2024, including Lollapalooza, Stagecoach and One Music Fest. "Toyota is focused on championing music discovery and supporting emerging artists," DeLilli says. "We love storytellers, culture-shapers and artists who engage beyond the stage." The company also leaned on music for its advertising and marketing campaigns, using the Ramones' "Do You Wanna Dance?" for a Camry spot and commissioning Puerto Rican singer Alejo to adapt a song, "Tiene Un No Sé Qué," for the automaker's Facebook and Instagram accounts. "We show support for all types of music," DeLilli adds.

MOLLY SPYCHALSKI

Global head of brand partnership marketing

UBER

Uber worked with Live Nation to sponsor its third straight The One Party during Super Bowl week in New Orleans, where Travis Scott performed his new single, "4x4." "Music is a powerful differentiator and was core to our approach to cut through a very crowded market and engage our audience," Spychalski says. Last year, the ride-share app also worked with AEG to score naming rights for Berlin concert venues now known as Uber Arena and Uber Eats Music Hall, stamped its Uber One brand onto a Lollapalooza lounge and made a deal with Beyoncé to offer transportation discounts for fans' *Cowboy Carter* listening parties. "Music, and particularly live music, is a key area of passion and excitement for the people who use our platform," Spychalski adds.

NATE PENCE

Vp of creative and editorial

ULTA BEAUTY

Last year's Lollapalooza was the "Super Bowl of branded experiences," according to one Live Nation executive, and among the giant floating Dunkin' sprinkles and Coca-Cola roller rink at the Chicago festival site was Ulta's House of Joy, a pop-up offering hair tinseling and coloring and makeup applications. In addition, the 600-brand beauty specialist partnered with Halsey's af94 line of beauty products, works with Billie Eilish and sponsored iHeartRadio's Jingle Ball concerts in New York and Los Angeles. Many of the company's pop-star partners are in its target demographic of "beauty lovers of all generations," says Pence, who adds that they "showcase their beauty tips and tricks for fans to see firsthand." He says: "We're excited to reach both new and existing fans at events. Like music, beauty brings joy to many through creativity."

MARISSA WESELOH

Senior director of partnerships

VERIZON

The mobile giant's most prominent 2024 music move was to showcase Beyoncé in a surprise Super Bowl commercial, in which she attempts to "break" the internet, as well as Verizon's 5G network, by doing superhuman things like running for "Beyoncé of the United States," or BOTUS. Concerts by Becky G and Xavi, which launched in the fall as part of the Verizon Access Concert Series, offered presales, app ticket purchases and giveaways at the company's retail stores. The November shows were part of the broader Verizon Access program, which provides similar ticket services for events at New York's Beacon Theatre, Radio City Music Hall and other Madison Square Garden properties. Verizon, which has a long-standing partnership with Live Nation and Ticketmaster, also offered presales for Anitta, Rauw Alejandro and others. "It's important that we connect with our customers in a personalized and authentic way," Weseloh says. "We want to partner with artists that can help us do that."

D.J. VAUGHN

Director of multicultural media partnerships

WALMART

Once a crucial retailer of physical music product, Walmart has recently focused on smaller music-related endeavors, such as the *Black & Unlimited* compilation album of indie hip-hop and R&B artists released in partnership with Raedio and Issa Rae's HOORAE Media production company last March. The big-box chain co-sponsored the Billboard Latin Music Awards, including a Xavi collaboration in which the regional Mexican singer-songwriter and his backup dancers wore outfits from Walmart's "Nuevolution" clothing line emphasizing Hispanic designers and brands. The brand also presented BET's lifetime achievement award to Usher in July and commemorated the honor with an exclusive vinyl sale of the artist's 2024 album, *Coming Home*. "We hope our cultural engagement work reaches and resonates with the masses, that it's emotionally appealing and positively affects consumer behavior," Vaughn says. "Our audience listens to various artists and across genres. They aren't confined to a singular sound."

MARCIA OSBORNE

Chief marketing officer for consumer lending

WELLS FARGO

To launch its new credit card last year, Wells Fargo sponsored concert series Autograph Card Exclusives for cardholders — Imagine Dragons in Dallas, Brandi Carlile in Atlanta, Maluma in New York and Halsey in San Francisco — all of which sold out. The company also partnered with the Zac Brown Band-headlining Country Baby Music Festival in Miami, among others. Members of its credit card club could snag tickets that included free food and drink, access to an air-conditioned lounge and other VIP benefits. "We're eager to reach a mix of our customers who range from [music] superfans to those who just love live music and are eager to be a part of this exclusive experience," Osborne says of Wells Fargo's strategy, which will expand to "more genres with additional artists."

JODI ROPERT

Vp of YouTube marketing

VIVIEN LEWIT

Global head of artists

CHRISTEEN KIM

Director of YouTube marketing, global music, premium and podcasts

DILARA CAGAL

Marketing manager, artist, industry and YouTube Shorts

YOUTUBE

For its nearly 5-year-old Shorts short-form video platform, YouTube partnered with Taylor Swift (for footage from The Eras Tour), Sabrina Carpenter (for promotional and off-the-cuff clips) and Stray Kids (for dance challenges), as well as Billie Eilish, Rosé, Lisa and others. As of January, according to Ropert, artists active on Shorts saw an average of more than 60% of their new channel subscribers coming directly from those posts. This is part of "the beauty of YouTube," she says of the long-dominant, Google-owned video platform whose users include "billions of music lovers." "No matter what type of artist you are, you can build a highly engaged fan base on the platform."

CONTRIBUTORS

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From left: Kenny Rogers, "Easy Lovin' " singer Freddie Hart and Dick Clark at the ACM Awards in 1972.

COURTESY OF ACM

CELEBRATING SIX DECADES OF THE ACM AWARDS

"Our DNA is that we take risks": Artists and executives look back on the Academy of Country Music's brightest nights

BY MELINDA NEWMAN

AT THE FIRST official Academy of Country Music Awards show in 1966 — held in Los Angeles and hosted by *Bonanza* actor Lorne Greene — Buck Owens took home top male vocalist, Bonnie Guitar won top female vocalist, and a young upstart named Merle Haggard snagged new male vocalist.

Two years prior, artist Tommy Wiggins, songwriter Eddie Miller and Red Barrel Niteclub owners (and married couple) Mickey and Chris Christensen had formed the ACM, then called the Country and Western Music Academy, to represent country music in the Western states, counterbalancing the Nashville-based Country Music Association, which launched in 1958.

Since then, the ACM has celebrated and advocated for the growth of country music, both domestically and abroad. In 2022, it moved its headquarters to Nashville, and the academy now boasts a membership of over 5,000 globally.

On May 8, the ACM will host the 60th edition of its awards show at Ford Center at the Star in Frisco, Texas. ACM CEO Damon Whiteside says the ceremony — which became the first major awards show to exclusively stream live for a global audience on Amazon Prime in 2022 — will celebrate the year's top artists while also honoring past winners and award-show milestones. Those landmarks include Marty Robbins taking home the first artist of the decade award in 1969, Loretta Lynn becoming the first woman to win entertainer of the year in 1976, Garth Brooks snagging six awards in one night in 1991 (a feat since replicated by Faith Hill and Chris Stapleton) and Miranda Lambert leading all winners with 37 career trophies.

During the Frisco festivities, the academy will also highlight the important work of Lifting Lives, the ACM's philanthropic partner that provides financial, disaster, mental and other aid to the country music community.

"We're looking at developing a show that's going to feel current because we obviously need to honor the current nominees," Whiteside says, "but there's also a real desire for us to showcase the legacy of the show because it's always charted its own course. We want to showcase what differentiates us.

"It's a little bit of a past/present/future

Brooks swept the ACM Awards in 1991.

From left: Jordan Davis, ACM CEO Whiteside and Carly Pearce at the ACM Honors in 2024.

Shane McAnally

TWO-TIME ACM SONGWRITER OF THE YEAR WINNER

"It feels very special that the ACM honors songwriters with their own category. We are usually the ones behind the scenes, but it's always a privilege to be recognized amongst your peers. Nashville was built on great songwriting, and this community is so special. Being named ACM songwriter of the year [in 2014 and 2019] will always be a highlight of my career."

Shania Twain

FOUR-TIME ACM AWARD WINNER

"My favorite moments are always meeting people backstage, other artists that I don't get to meet. At the beginning of my career, I lived in Nashville and I was seeing more of the country music industry around just in general. But my career has taken me so internationally that I rarely run into country artists. The ACMs are one of the only places that happens."

Toby Keith played "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" at the 2002 ACM Awards, in the wake of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

BROOKS, KEITH: COURTESY OF ACM. WHITESIDE: TERRY WYATT/GETTY IMAGES FOR ACM. MCANALLY: JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES. TWAIN: SAMIR HUSSEIN/WIREIMAGE.

approach," Whiteside adds. "It's going to be a really iconic night and a great way to look back and look forward and celebrate where we are right now as an industry."

You moved the ACM's headquarters to Nashville from Los Angeles in December 2022. How do you differentiate yourself from the Country Music Association, and how have you upheld the original mandate of representing Western states?
We really grappled with whether we should make the move when I came into the job [in 2020]. That was definitely one of my first orders of business, coming in, that the board asked me to do some research on. Over a few months, I looked at the pros and cons [of the Nashville move], what it meant from a historical perspective, a strategic perspective and a financial perspective in moving all of our operations and our staff and knowing we probably would lose staff by moving.

COVID then hit within that process, and we were out of the office for about two years. During that time, it became more and more apparent that it made sense to be in Nashville because probably over 90% of our constituents are in the Nashville market, from our board of directors to all of our industry members and artists.

What about the organization's original mission?
When we started back in the '60s, there was no support for artists on the West Coast — they were shunned, basically, by Nashville, and there was no one looking out for them or for their interests. Also, there wasn't really a bridge between the studios and television and country music. That's really why we were formed in the first place, to create that bridge. But over time there's been less need to be in that role because, thankfully, country is ubiquitous now. It just made sense for us to move here strategically.

How did you decide where in town to relocate?
We did not even consider Music Row as a place to move — it just didn't feel authentic for us. Nor did we want to encroach on traditional Music Row. Wedgewood Houston offered us an opportunity to be in an emerging area of town that's still very convenient, and there's a lot of music companies opening here. Our positioning is that we are the renegade organization, so we should be somewhere a little more gritty and edgy. That's ultimately why we landed where we landed.

The ACM Awards' previous slogan was "Country Music's Party of the Year." How have you moved away from that?
That was our tagline and position for many, many years. Especially being in Las Vegas [where the ACMs were held annually from 2003 to 2019, except for 2015], it made

The Chicks on the shoot for their video for the 1999 ACM Awards.

a lot of sense. During COVID, when we [presented] our first show in Nashville in September 2020, we did it at three venues [Grand Ole Opry House, Ryman Auditorium and The Bluebird Cafe], and we named that night "A Special Night of Heart and Hits." That really changed the tone and the vibe of the show.

We carried that over the following year. And then when we went back to Vegas [at Allegiant Stadium in 2022], we sort of brought back the party of the year, but with being on a new platform with Amazon, they had a lot of feelings about how we could reposition ourselves.

And then, moving back to Texas in 2023 following the [awards'] 50th anniversary being there [in 2015], the feeling was we just have other sorts of stories to tell around what the show is beyond being a party. "Party" sells it a little short.

What comes after the 60th anniversary?

For 2026, we may do a major pivot again and define what's the future of the academy. This year is a very special year, but next year is going to be kind of turning the page. It'll be a fresh new year. We don't know yet where we'll be. We don't know what [outlet] we're going to be on. Everything's a new day in 2026, so it's going to be the evolution of the ACM Awards, but we're excited about that because it's a blank slate.

The show is co-owned by Dick Clark Productions. [DCP is owned by Penske Media Eldridge, a joint venture between Eldridge Industries and *Billboard* parent company Penske Media.] What is the key to your working relationship?

The relationship started in 1979, which is pretty incredible to think about. Dick Clark hosted many times and then came on as executive producer in '79, and shortly after that his son [R.A. "RAC" Clark] got involved. He was with us for all those decades as well, and now we have Raj Kapoor [as showrunner]. It's been a really great partnership. Both sides bring so much to the table.

We consider ourselves the country music experts, and we're the ones running the award side of it, making sure our members and industry are engaged. We lean in for a lot of the talent asks and make sure our brand and the industry are being represented properly. Dick Clark Productions provides all the production resources and really puts the show together from a television/streaming perspective. We both have an equal seat at the table.

In 2022, you became the first major awards show to move to a streaming platform when you debuted on Prime Video. What did you learn from that first year?

That's probably one of my top moments in my five years. The first year going into it, none of us had any idea what we were doing in terms of what the impact would be on the show. How do you suddenly produce a live show with no commercial

Miranda Lambert

37-TIME ACM AWARD WINNER

"It's an honor to get any award and be recognized by my peers, but getting the album of the year award is always extra special. [Lambert won the honor five times between 2008 and 2017.] Country music is about storytelling, and knowing that people took the time to listen to an album top to bottom — and love it — means a lot to me."

Carrie Underwood

16-TIME ACM AWARD WINNER

"I'm extremely honored to be the first woman to have won ACM entertainer of the year twice and the only female ever to win that award three times [in 2009, 2010 and 2020]. We had some fun celebrating those! We don't do what we do for praise or trophies, but it means a lot to be recognized for your hard work, and none of it would be possible without all the loyal fans."

Bill Anderson

TWO-TIME ACM AWARD WINNER

"The academy first began recognizing songwriters in 2007 with the advent of their Poet's Award, and they gave me their very first one. It's always cool to be the first at anything, and when you look at the names of some who have followed it makes it even more special: Merle Haggard, Don Schlitz, Cindy Walker, Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson and more. I had come to Nashville 50 years earlier with dreams of being a songwriter. Nothing could be more special than having those dreams come true… and the ACM Poet's Award to confirm it."

CHICKS: COURTESY OF ACM. LAMBERT: MICKEY BERNAL/NBC/NBCU PHOTO BANK/GETTY IMAGES. UNDERWOOD: TIBRINA HOBSON/GETTY IMAGES. ANDERSON: JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES.

Taylor Swift at the ACM All-Star Jam in 2009.

Lynn onstage in 1973.

From left: June Carter Cash, Johnny Cash, Marie Osmond and Robert Duvall in 1991 when Cash received the ACM Pioneer Award.

breaks? Typically, you're using those breaks to make set changes.

But what we found was it actually improved the process of booking the show, planning the show and the show experience itself. Because it was such a quick two hours, top to bottom, it forced everyone to be even more on their toes in terms of the show's pace and, because of it being jam-packed with music, it felt like a true music concert. I think what we've carried forward is keeping the show really tight. There's no time to get bored because you're constantly moving.

The challenge of streaming is that they do not report viewership. The music industry wants to know how many people are watching. I don't know the numbers. [But] if you're feeling the bump, then does it matter how many people are watching?

We do have a sense that we're on par with where we've traditionally been with the show, if not more than that. Plus, we're global. We're in over 230 countries and territories, live and on demand. Now we're getting a much larger international reach.

How much does the show's status as a global event influence picking a host? It was Dolly Parton for two years — once with Garth Brooks — and now it's Reba McEntire, who hosted or co-hosted 12 times between 2002 and 2019.

Dolly Parton's a global superstar. In any market around the world, if you saw your Prime Video home screen with Dolly, you're probably going to be interested. Reba is very similar. She's a legend as well. This is her 18th time hosting [or co-hosting]. The other part is both of them are multigenerational. They're relevant now. The multigeneration piece is big because it brings in all audiences.

Reba came to us prior to last year and really wanted to be part of the 60th-anniversary legacy of this show because she feels very connected to it, and she's had a huge impact on what this show is. That's when we signed her to a two-year deal to [host in 2024 and 2025].

We are seeing more labels in New York and Los Angeles sign country acts, while artists including Post Malone, Beyoncé and Ringo Starr are incorporating elements of country into their music. How does the ACM embrace that, in terms of the awards show and the organization?

We haven't addressed it yet. We have had a lot of conversations with our board about it, and everyone is in agreement that we need to figure it out. But we need to do it in the right way and not make a rush move, because we want to make sure we're protecting the integrity of the vote and that the members spend a majority of their time in country music versus a one-off project.

Long term, we'll likely figure out a way to allow those "coastal labels" in as long as they meet the criteria that those individuals spend a majority of their time in country music. We will find a way to incorporate them into our membership and then [they will] be able to vote.

What is something from the past 60 years that you consider sacred and don't ever want to change about the awards show?

Our DNA of this show has always been — and always will be — that we're a little out of the box. We're a little left of center. In the '60s, we had all the television celebrities hosting and we've really held on to that. We've always had a lot of film and TV talent involved in the show, so that carries through.

We've held on to the fact that we really maximize the out-of-genre opportunities by having out-of-genre artists collaborating. Our DNA is that we take risks. We're progressive. We've [leaned] very forward in diversity the past several years especially, and we'll continue to do that. While the artists change over the years, our identity and the DNA of the show has remained consistent. We want the show to be fun and the fans to have a great time and let loose.

Additional reporting by Jessica Nicholson.

Jo Dee Messina

ACM AWARD WINNER

"I cherish my win of the [top new female vocalist] of the year award [in 1999]. It was a moment I got to share with my mother, who was present to witness the payoff of a lifetime of support and dedication to my dreams. The ACMs' production crew is one of a kind. They are a family that has always gone above and beyond to be sure I was taken care of with performances, presentations, nominations and anything I needed to be a part of the televised programs."

Tigirlily Gold

ACM AWARD WINNER

"Our favorite memory is when we got to perform our song 'I Tried a Ring On' after winning our very first ACM Award, for new duo/group of the year, in 2024. Jelly Roll gave us a pep talk right before we went out to play, and our musical heroes Little Big Town introduced us. We will never forget that truly surreal moment! The ACMs have a magical way of making dreams come true for artists like us."

SWIFT, LYNN, CASH: COURTESY OF ACM. MESSINA: THEO WARGO/WIREIMAGE. TIGIRLILY GOLD: CHRISTOPHER POLK.

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Karol G onstage at Madrid's Santiago Bernabéu Stadium in 2024.

Spain's Music Scene Is Thriving

Industry leaders talk of exploding talent, evolving genres and a vibrant live business

BY LEILA COBO

ON THE EVENING OF July 23, 2024, the last night of her global tour and her fourth sold-out date at Santiago Bernabéu Stadium in Madrid, a visibly emotional Karol G told the crowd of 55,000: "I'm going to say that truly, tonight will be the most amazing of my life."

It was, at the very least, a grand finale to the highest-grossing tour ever by a Latin female artist, grossing $313.3 million across 56 concerts, according to Billboard Boxscore. Karol G's Madrid shows were also record-setting, selling 220,000 tickets and making her the first artist to sell out four shows at the stadium, which finished renovations earlier in 2024.

The fact that a Latin American artist could move so many tickets in a major European city underscores Spain's growing importance as not just a bridge for Latin music between the Americas and Europe but also a place for music in Spanish — the new global pop — to grow.

In 2023, Spanish promoters and venues reported gross ticket sales of nearly 579 million euros ($604.5 million) to Spain's Association of Music Promoters, an extraordinary 26.5% increase from revenue of 459 million euros ($479 million) in 2022. While Karol G, Luis Miguel and Taylor Swift brought stadium headlining tours to the country, according to its ministry of culture, Spanish talent is also robustly represented at the stadium level with recent shows from Manuel Carrasco and Dellafuente.

Numbers from the country's ministry of culture, compiled by the legal and business management firm Sympathy for the Lawyer, show that 40.5% of concertgoers in 2024 attended shows of Spanish pop/rock, followed by 11.1% who went to see *canción de autor* (similar to singer-songwriter performances).

Meanwhile, beyond the live scene, Spain's music consumption has grown exponentially.

According to year-end numbers reported by Promusicae, Spain's music industry trade group, there were 98.5 billion audio streams across all platforms in 2024, compared with 87 billion the previous year. More than 1,180 artists notched over 10 million streams and 70 had more than 100 million streams.

That report of growth aligns with figures from global music industry trade association IFPI. In its Engaging With Music report, IFPI stated that Spanish music consumers averaged 22.1 hours per week of listening, compared with the global average of 20.7.

Spain's receptiveness to music of all genres and provenance is evident in its five top-selling albums of 2024. According to Promusicae, Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department* was the bestseller, followed by Karol G's *Mañana Será Bonito* at No. 2, Spanish artists Quevedo's *Donde Quiero Estar* at No. 3 and Saiko's *Sakura* at No. 4 and Bad Bunny's 2022 album, *Un Verano Sin Ti*, at No. 5.

No wonder labels are increasingly turning to Spain to develop pan-regional artists. Examples include the success of Colombian artist Camilo after the pandemic; Venezuela's Joaquina, who won best new artist at the 2023 Latin Grammy Awards and whose first tours were in Spain; and Colombian stadium pop-rock band Morat, which is signed to Universal Music Spain.

And although Spanish-born artists have a tougher time crossing over into the U.S. and Latin American markets than vice versa, a new generation of acts that includes Quevedo, Rels B, Bad Gyal, Aitana, Arde Bogotá and Rosalía is showing that reaching fans in the Americas may be more feasible than ever.

Fifteen months after the Latin Grammys were held in Spain in November 2023 — the show's first foray outside the United States — *Billboard* will host a reception for Spain's industry leaders on March 18 and recently spoke with some of those executives to ask what's next for the dynamic market.

'A Flow Of Cultures In Two Directions'

Given its crucial location as an entryway into Europe and its cultural significance as the birthplace of Spanish, "Spain is a place of fusion between Anglo and Hispanic cultures. It's a flow of talent and culture in two directions," says Vicent Argudo, head of music for Prisa Media. "Spain imports Latin styles into the old continent and adapts them to pop. It's a place for mainstream experimentation." While Spain for years seemed impenetrable for Latin American genres like reggaetón and regional Mexican, an influx of immigrants, coupled with increasing global acceptance of the Spanish language, has turned Spain into a market that imports and reinvents genres. "Spain gives Latin sounds a pop vision that makes them more accessible to the world," Argudo says.

A Breeding Ground For International Talent

For José María Barbat, president of Sony Music Iberian Peninsula, Spain is a nonstop talent generator, from Julio Iglesias in the '80s to Rosalía or C. Tangana today.

"In this context, we're certain the next big Spanish star is around the corner," Barbat says. "We continue to see artists with the skills necessary to jump to an international stage, showing there's not only talent but also an industry ecosystem ready to channel all that creativity." Proof of that is Arde Bogotá, a Spanish rock band garnering success in an urban world. "It speaks to the importance of keeping an eye out not just for popular genres," he says, "but for talent coming out of niche genres." **Artist To Watch** "I'm particularly excited about Lia Kali, a very well-rounded and very young artist we just signed," Barbat says. "She has a mind-blowing voice and the ability to cross over in a big way into other Latin markets."

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Quevedo at the 2024 Latin Grammy Awards in Miami.

The Power Of A Cutting-Edge Stadium

The Spanish music industry is experiencing a golden era, a prime example of which, says Live Nation Spain president Pino Sagliocco, is the newly renovated Santiago Bernabéu Stadium and the sold-out shows it has hosted from Spanish artists Hombres G and Alejandro Sanz, as well as Swift and Colombia's Karol G. "Those tours highlight unprecedented growth in Spain's music history, breaking records in the years after the pandemic," Sagliocco says. "The global industry now recognizes the country's leadership and enormous potential as a key platform for the growth of Latin music in Europe." While concerts at Bernabéu were suspended last September due to noise ordinance issues, its string of sold-out shows by artists both local and international highlighted the enormous, previously untapped potential of a state-of-the-art stadium in the nation's touristy capital. "The global industry now recognizes the country's leadership and enormous potential as a key platform for the growth of Latin music in Europe," Sagliocco says.

Spanish As The 'New Normal'

For José Luis Sevillano, CEO of AIE — Spain's collecting society for performers, with over 35,000 members in Spain alone and representing the rights of over 800,000 performers globally — music in Spanish is on the brink of "becoming a magnificent new normal." Not only does music in Spanish now top global charts, "but at the same time it's placed new value on the diversity and plurality of our culture in the entire world," he says. AIE's most recently reported numbers registered a 29% growth in rights collection last year compared with 2023, and AIE's study on consumption habits in Spain also found that Spanish-language music was more listened to than English-language music on streaming platforms. Plus, after 30 years of work, Spain adopted new legislation providing better compensation and working conditions for artists and musicians. "This will eventually lead to a more just and balanced music ecosystem," Sevillano says, "which is basic in allowing creators to develop their talent to its full potential."

Challenge For 2025 "Finding a responsible, respectful and balanced development of [artificial intelligence] for artists," Sevillano says.

Rels B attended Milan Fashion Week in 2024.

A Streaming Boom

Streaming dominates Spanish music consumption, accounting for nearly 90% of the market, according to Promusicae. Meanwhile, Spanish artists have become major streaming draws worldwide. In 2023, Spanish acts generated royalties of more than 123 million euros ($128.5 million) on Spotify, which is almost four times the royalties they generated on the platform in 2017, according to Spotify's head of music for Southern and Eastern Europe, Melanie Parejo. That growth "is reflected in local consumption but also in the capacity to generate global business," Parejo says, noting that over 50% of all royalties generated by Spanish artists on Spotify in 2023 came from listeners outside of Spain. In 2024, Rels B was the Spanish artist most listened to outside of Spain.

An 'Explosion' Of Talent

What was once an insular market is now having an international impact. "The Spanish music industry has undergone a radical transformation in the last decade, becoming a market with great global projection with artists like Rosalía, C. Tangana, Quevedo and an explosion of indie proposals like La La Love You," says Carlos Galán, host of industry podcast *Simpatía por la Industria*. "Stylistic barriers have been broken, and even the chasm that existed between alternative and mainstream has grown smaller."

Challenge For 2025 The fact that "every day there's a new festival" is huge, Galán says. "But truly, it's a bubble I'm afraid to see burst. All have identical lineups, little innovation and no one is betting on emerging talent."

Sponsors Serious About Music

Few brand initiatives surrounding music are as complex and developed as Banco Santander's Santander SMusic. The bank offers a 360 media platform that includes editorial content and live performances, in addition to its branded events, concerts and partnerships with labels and artists. "In a year we've executed over 235 presales and sold 600,000 tickets, becoming a point of reference for music in Spain and creating a complete ecosystem of exclusive content," says Felipe Martín Martín, Santander España's director of media, sponsorships and events. Santander's SMusic has partnerships with festivals including Mad Cool, Sonorama and Rockland, as well as with companies like Universal, Sony and Los 40. But Martín Martín is especially excited about the growth of music tourism in Spain, "maximizing that No. 1 spot Spain has held in the global ranking of tourism to music festivals since 2022."

An International Gateway

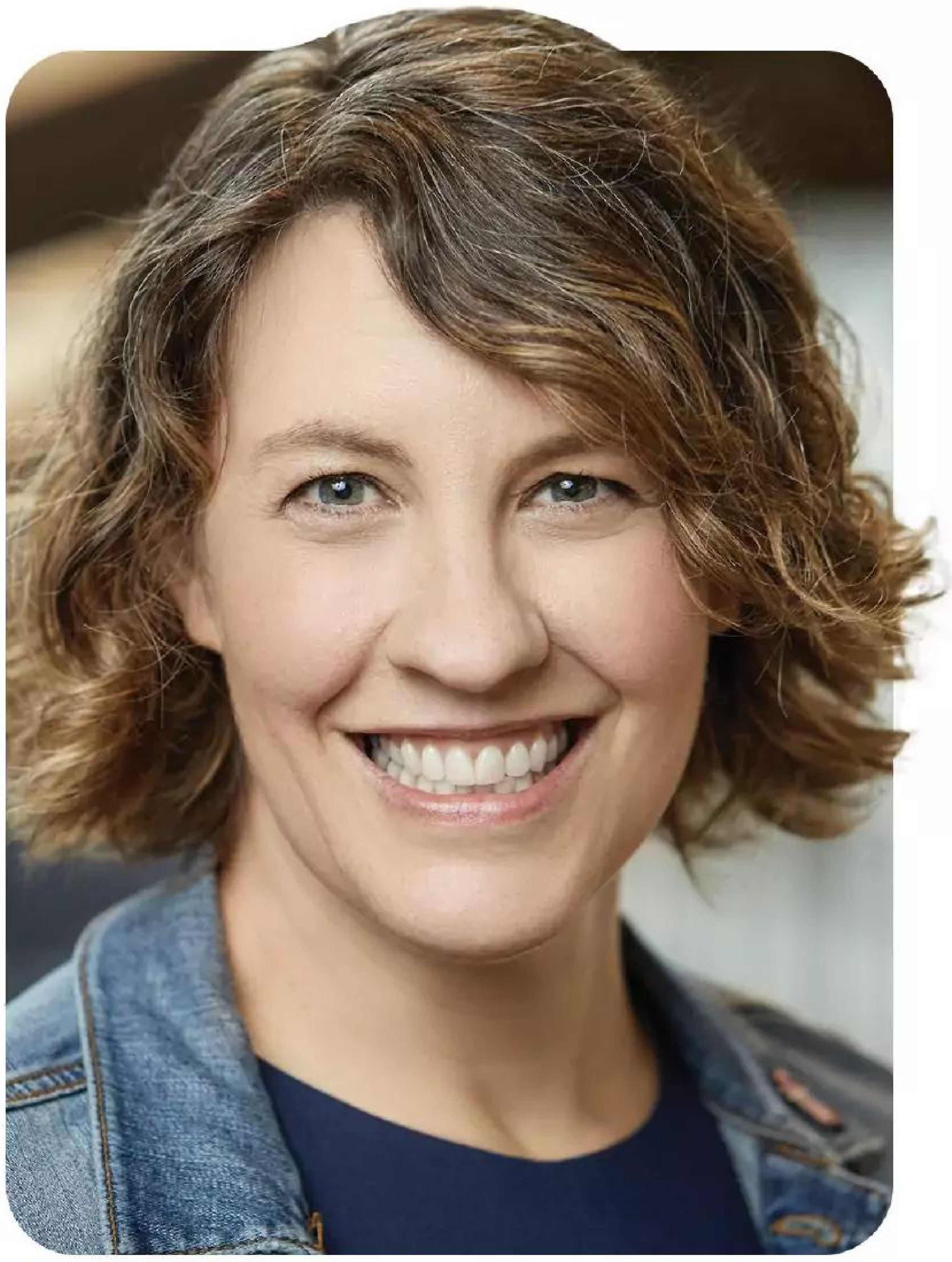
Spain's geography offers easy access from both the United States and Latin America and to the rest of Europe. "It has the potential [to be a] port of entry for Latin artists to other European markets, particularly the U.K., France, Italy and Germany, who all provide strategic opportunities in the live market," says Narcis Rebollo, president/CEO of Universal's Global Talent Service, which manages and books over 100 artists including Aitana, Pablo Alborán, David Bisbal, Lola Índigo and Joaquina. The potential is already being realized in Spain, where ticket sales jumped more than 26% from 2022 to 2023 and more than 250% in the last decade, according to Spain's Association of Music Promoters.

Growing Trend "Brand investment in music has grown more than 100%," Rebollo says, "with music being used as a new driver for brands to position their products."

A Good Partner

Spain's impressive market stats, including its sizable listening and streaming growth per capita, make it a source of local talent and a priority for imported talent. "We're listening to more than 260 million songs per day," Warner Music Iberia president Guillermo González Arévalo says. "Coming to Spain to promote their new albums has had a great return on investment and recognition for artists like Dua Lipa, Myke Towers, Coldplay, Charli xcx and Linkin Park, who have charted high on our charts paving the way for their next tours." In 2024, Towers was the most listened to artist on Spotify in Spain.

QUEVEDO: JASON KOERNER/GETTY IMAGES. RELS B: PIETRO S. D'APRANO/GETTY IMAGES.



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Antonio Garcia (left) and Pepe Esteban of Arde Bogotá onstage at the Coca-Cola Music Experience Festival in Madrid in 2024.

Looking Forward Warner is also expanding activity in its recently opened music hub in Madrid. “Each day more music is written, and there are more collaborations created with Latin artists,” González Arévalo says.

A Flexible Market In Constant Evolution

Spain’s music market is known today for its strong festival culture and its affinity for music in Spanish, regardless of origin — and it has been receptive to new trends of late. In November 2023, the popular reality music competition *Operación Triunfo* relaunched on Amazon Prime Video. “It highlighted the extraordinary capacity of the format to adapt to new digital consumption trends, bringing in traditional viewers and new generations,” head of Amazon Music Spain Claire Imoucha says of the show, which will return in September. Christmas music also got a boost in new formats, with artists like David Bisbal, Niña Pastori, and Camilo and Evaluna (who had an Amazon Music Original song in November) reimagining traditional repertoire and “consolidating Christmas as a key consumption period.”

What Comes Next “Spanish music is living an extraordinary moment, with genres like rock and flamenco displaying their capacity for evolution and renovation,” Imoucha says. “Artists like Arde Bogotá and Carolina Durante are leaders in a new rock scene, and artists like Israel Fernandez, María José Llergo and Ángeles Toledano are bringing a contemporary twist to historic genres.”

A Consolidated Value Chain

“Our music industry is a very professionalized industry in every sector of its value chain,” Promusicae president Antonio Guisasola says. “In addition, we have great artistic talent that is mixing genres and renovating the different roots genres of the many cultures that coexist in Spain.” A sign of maturity of the market was the launch of its Spanish Academy of Music, “where all music professionals in the country get together to honor the work we did in the year,” Guisasola says, and the first Academy of Music Awards took place last June.

Aitana performed at the 2024 Morrina Festival at Port of A Coruna in A Coruna, Spain.

Beyond Major Cities

The growth of Spain’s music scene has translated to consumption outside major cities, says Alfonso Santiago, CEO of concert promoter Last Tour, which also puts together the annual BIME conferences in Bilbao, Spain, and Bogotá, Colombia. “There’s a wide spectrum of cities beyond the big capitals that have good venues and audiences that respond favorably,” he says. That openness is particularly evident and growing among younger generations. “Traditionally, adult fans have been more close-minded,” he says. “I’m excited to see a young audience open to discovering new things.”

A Rich Culture

Spain’s location has helped foster its rich musical output. “We have a confluence of music from Latin America, Northern Africa, local folklore and, of course, our great contribution to the world’s art, flamenco,” Sony Music Spain GM Blanca Salcedo says. Sony’s new 5020 Studios have become a perfect place to mine that cultural landscape. The studios, which opened a year ago, “are hugely valuable for this purpose,” Salcedo says. “It’s a unique space that combines the best technology, design and services to foster our artists’ creativity.”

A Festival Destination; Many Collaborations

In addition to its massive stadium concerts, Spain hosts nearly 900 music festivals a year, according to the latest Oh, Holy Festivals report. “Spain has established itself as a key market for tours and festivals, positioning itself as a global tourism destination for music,” says Jorge Iglesias, founder and CEO of concert promoter Iglesias Entertainment. In addition, a series of very successful cross-cultural collaborations — including Quevedo and Bizarrap’s “Bzrp Music Sessions, Vol. 52,” which topped *Billboard*’s Global 200 and Global Excl. U.S. charts in 2022 — has renewed interest in the country as a talent incubator.

A Prominent Indie Scene

The diversity of genres in Spain “is richer than ever,” says Believe Spain GM Maite Díez, adding, “The local independent scene has gained great prominence.” Case in point: Indie artist Iñigo Quintero, whose hit “Si No Estás” made history as the first track by a solo Spanish artist to reach No. 1 on Spotify’s global chart. On Spotify, nearly 60% of all royalties generated by Spanish artists come from indie labels or artists, Díez says. By extension, there has been “an explosion of new talent that has gone from the digital ecosystem to massive success,” including Daniela Blasco, a finalist at the Benidorm Fest song contest.

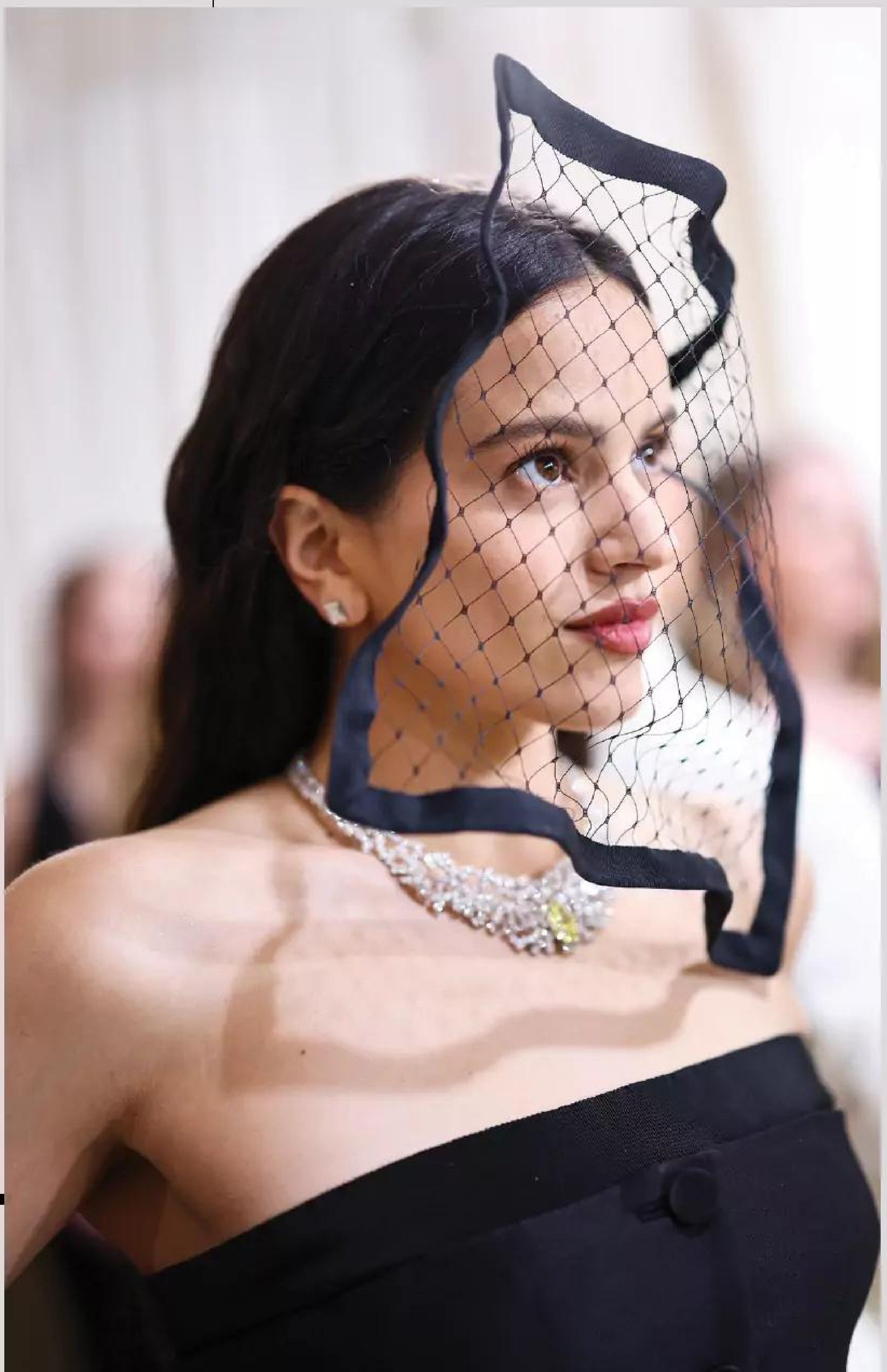
A Mature Industry

Beyond streaming strength, “Spain’s music industry is mature in all its subsectors,” says Soco Collado, president of Spain’s music federation Es Música, which represents and promotes the industry’s collective interests. “We have huge established artists, a young scene creating spectacular things and the companies working at every level are very solid and are investing,” she says. The sustained growth of streaming stands out for Collado, and she’s particularly excited about a new generation of very young female artists who are “super committed and creating musical marvels,” including flamenco artists María José Llergo, Angeles Toledano and La Tania.

New Opportunities

Universal Music Spain co-managing director Alicia Arauzo was struck by the recent success of David Bisbal’s *Todo Es Posible en Navidad*, which topped Promusicae’s albums chart in December. “It feels like we tapped a local vein with Christmas music, opening up an eternal opportunity [for the music],” she says. The proliferation of stadium concerts has also been a breakthrough for Spain, she says, along with “the growing strength of female talent, both local and international.” b

Rosalía at the 2024 Met Gala in New York.



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chartbreaker

LEON THOMAS

How the rising R&B singer-songwriter fetched his breakthrough with "Mutt"

BY KYLE DENIS

▷ "It was an uncomfortable song to play my mom," R&B artist Leon Thomas says of "Mutt," a flirtatious track that mentions the urge to "pop a shroom to re-create the feeling." It's the Grammy Award-winning songwriter's first Billboard Hot 100 entry as a recording artist following years of behind-the-scenes work that includes hits for Ariana Grande, SZA and others. And his mother loved it, too. "She told me this is going to be one of my biggest records."

For Thomas, 31 — the Brooklyn-bred son of Black Rock Coalition parents and the grandson of an opera singer — music and family have always been intertwined. His parents, who frequented CBGB, laid the foundation for the rock-infused soul on Thomas' second album, *Mutt*, released in September. Since then, he supported Blxst on tour and embarked on his own headlining trek. But February solidified Thomas' turn as a front-facing star: "Mutt" entered the Hot 100 dated Feb. 8, he made his live-TV debut on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* the same week and performed on NPR's *Tiny Desk* later that month.

Still, his breakthrough has been nearly two decades in the making. At 13, after Broadway runs in *The Lion King*, *The Color Purple* and *Caroline, Or Change*, Thomas signed his first deal with Columbia Records. He made his film debut in 2007's *August Rush*, which led to a Nickelodeon development deal and roles on shows *The Backyardigans* and *Victorious*. As the deal was nearing its end, Thomas explored his options, and recalls the advice he got from Republic's Wendy Goldstein. "Journeying through your 20s is you becoming everything that you need from everybody else," she told him.

He spent time during the next decade studying under Babyface and Boi-1da and briefly signed to Alex da Kid's Kidinakorner. He met manager Jonathan Azu in 2019 and became the first act on his Culture Collective roster. Two years later, he landed a record deal with Ty Dolla $ign and Motown Records' joint venture, EZMNY, after running into A&R executive Shawn Barron while getting groceries. "I was scared because signing under an artist can be either heaven or hell," Thomas says. "Luckily, I'm stomping around in heaven."

The *Mutt* campaign began with the release of its title track on Aug. 9. A funky R&B midtempo tune that nods to Enchantment's "Silly Love Song" by way of a Bootsy Collins-esque bassline, "Mutt" is the product of Thomas' desire to "have a record that shows what I'm about: live music, funk and vulnerability."

Thomas' team banked on word-of-mouth from live shows to grow his following. "The phones were always up, but they would really come out for 'Mutt,' " Azu says. Thomas' 13-date U.S. fall tour at intimate venues doubled as a way to promote himself at radio. "A lot of program directors are just outside the *Victorious* demographic, but the people in the studios and offices are within that demographic, and so are [their] children," Azu says.

As "Mutt" climbs at radio — including to No. 7 on Adult R&B Airplay — Thomas is playing the long game. "I loved seeing how Lizzo kept promoting her hits," he says. A *Mutt* deluxe edition is in the works, and Thomas mentions potential collaborations with Kehlani, Big Sean and Halle Bailey, plus a previously teased team-up with Stormzy. There's also a song on which Thomas plays every instrument.

"There are sides to me that I haven't shown the world yet, so I'm spoon-feeding them," Thomas says. "This deluxe is me stepping deeper into my purpose." b

No. 7

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